

BLUE CHINA

By B. M. Croker *Author of "Her Own People,"*

"In Old Madras," "Given in Marriage," "Bridget," etc., etc.

*"Something the heart must have to cherish,
Must love, and joy, and sorrow learn;
Something with passion clasp or perish,
And in itself to ashes burn."*

Henry W. Longfellow.

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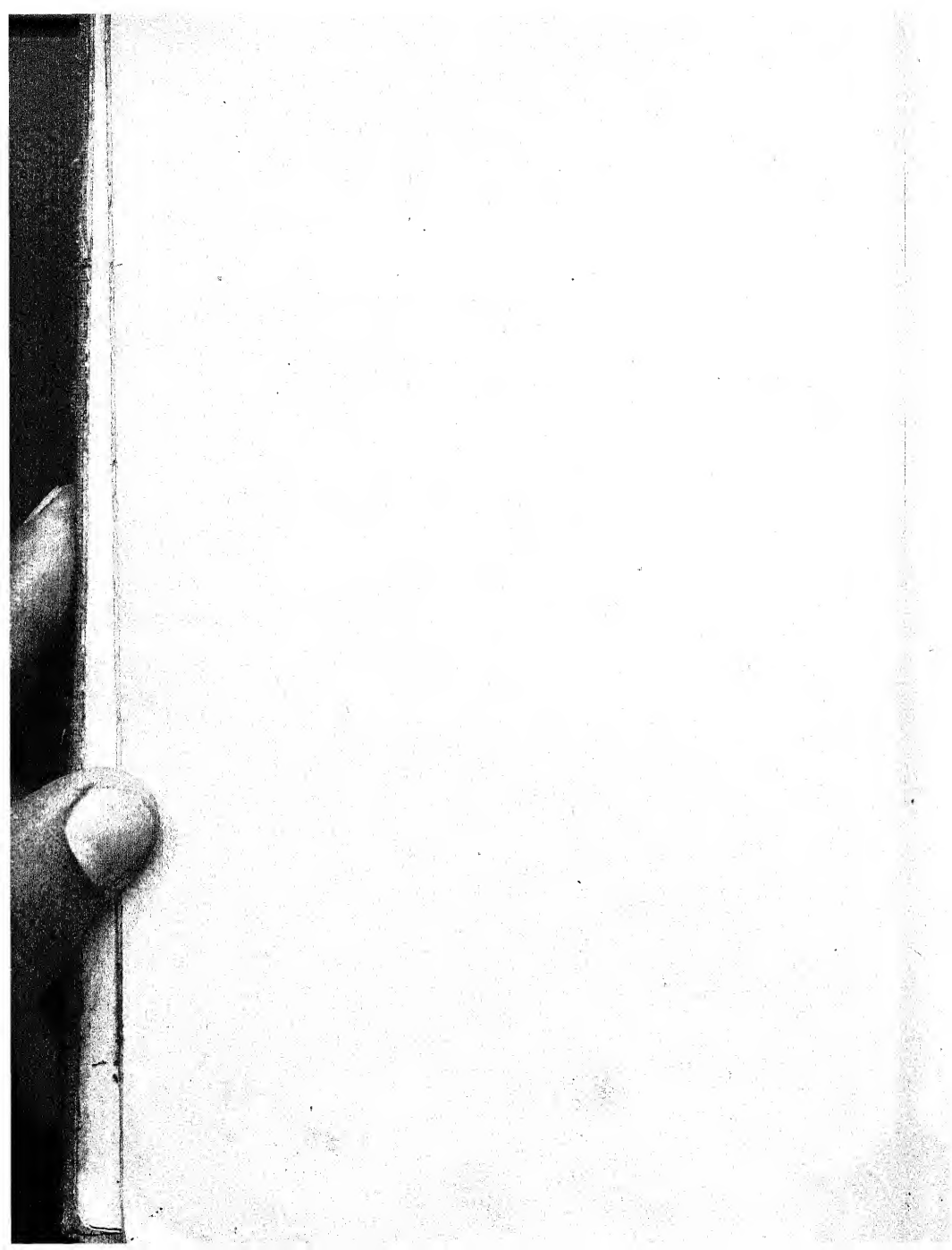
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BLUE CHINA

CHAPTER I

DARGAN OF SHANGHAI

MR. MICHAEL DARGAN stood before the door of his house, a fine Adams mansion in Bedford Square, fumbling for his latch-key. In one hand he carried a small sandal-wood box, whilst the other searched exhaustively in various pockets ; at last, with a muttered imprecation, he accepted defeat.

Michael Dargan was a tall, broad-shouldered individual, wearing a new silk hat, and an admirably cut coat ; to judge by his back, his age might be between thirty and forty, but when after a furious pull at the bell, he turned to face the Square, it was evident that more than sixty years had passed over his grizzled head. He was clean-shaven, save for a short, coarse moustache ; beneath bushy brows, a pair of keen and clever eyes looked out upon the world ; the nose was well shaped, with expansive and sensitive nostrils ; the jaw exceptionally square—altogether the countenance of a man with a rugged nature, and an imperious and independent character.

Perhaps, before he disappears, a further description of Mr. Dargan may not be out of place. The eldest son of an old, but impecunious Irish family, he had been educated at Portora school, and had subsequently passed through Trinity College, without special distinction, but with few debts. Rejecting the idea of taking orders, he was looking about for some congenial employment, such

as a land agency, when a piece of unexpected luck befell him.

His godfather, Michael Byrne, a wealthy merchant in Shanghai, offered him an opening in his business, and this proved to be the making of young Michael. In the whirling activities of Shanghai mercantile affairs, he found himself to be a round man in a round hole, and discovered to his secret surprise that he, the descendant of a county family, had been endowed with an inborn and natural aptitude for trade—also a gift of tongues. Consequently young Dargan entered this new life of correspondence, sales, consignments, brokerage—as readily as the proverbial duck takes to a pond.

He remained in China for thirty-six years, with but one trip home, and another to Australia. The Far East had soaked into his very marrow, and he had even acquired something of the Celestial in appearance; his yellow skin, prominent cheek bones, small watchful and unflinching eyes, were nearly akin to the Mongolian type.

On the death of his godfather Dargan succeeded to a first-class business and a considerable fortune, but never married—in spite of the undoubted attractions of British and American butterfly spinsters, who had fluttered seductively in his society—his whole heart—such as it was—being given to blue china. With him, the cult of old porcelain was not a mere dilettante taste, but a consuming and fiery passion. Time, money, trouble, and occasionally honour, were sunk in his absorbing mania. The craze had dated from a casual present of two blue jars; these proved to be the nucleus of a collection that had grown to a thousand specimens, was famous in Shanghai, and the neighbouring locality—its reputation had even spread to Hong Kong.

A man of unblemished probity in business and trade, it was whispered (possibly by the envious) that Dargan would stoop to all manner of meanness, intrigue, and underhand crafty tricks, in order to secure a coveted article; and it was said that he would barter his

very soul for one particular specimen of old brown Ming.

The most toilsome up-country journeys, on horse-back or by river-boat, the most torrid heat and daunting obstacles, never turned him a hair's-breadth from his quest. A knowledge of the customs and language proved invaluable assets; these, with a heavy purse, gleaned the collector a rich harvest.

Since Dargan had risen in the world, he had not overlooked his family—a brother and two sisters. The latter were married, the former he had summoned to take a responsible place in his firm. After a time, Patrick Dargan wedded a pretty Scotch girl, and within three years, both he and his wife had been carried off by cholera, leaving a daughter of two in the hands of Michael. The hands proved both kind and generous; little Jean was sent home to England in charge of a faithful amah, and subsequently brought up and educated at her Uncle's expense.

Dargan's youngest sister, Henrietta, who was remarkably handsome, had made an unexpectedly good match. Her husband, the Reverend and Honourable Augustus Toler, was brother to Lord Tolerton, and held a fat family living near Tolerton Court. Julia, the elder, who was also a beauty, had utterly disgraced herself, and shamed her relatives—her name was never mentioned—had not been uttered for years. Julia had been attracted by a good-looking, insidious stranger, named Anthony Vole, whom a hard-riding acquaintance had presented to the neighbourhood. Captain Vole was understood to be wealthy, and to have wide financial interests; he had an attractive personality, danced admirably, sang seductively, and in a locality where men were scarce, and there were legions of girls, such an arrival was naturally welcomed with open arms. Vole had a convincing enthusiasm, extraordinary powers of dominating weak or uncertain wills, and persuading his associates; in a short time, numbers of his

acquaintances—hunting men, parsons, widows, and gentlemen farmers—had been beguiled into taking shares in that "sure thing," a South American El Dorado—in other words, a silver mine; indeed, such were its prospects, according to Captain Vole, that they actually scrambled and clamoured, and even fought for shares—there are always credulous dupes awaiting the plausible swindler! Vole was a frequent visitor at the Dargans' once imposing but now shabby home—till Mr. Dargan received a hint in the Kildare Street Club, that Vole, the handsome company promoter, was a "rogue," and thereupon promptly dropped him; Julia was forbidden to see or correspond with her admirer—a command she accepted with sullen assent and secret disobedience.

Not long afterwards there was a painful financial scandal, in which Vole was involved and subsequently compelled to fly the country. But when he did so—he did not fly alone, but carried with him Julia Dargan. The rest was silence; a silence which had remained unbroken for eight and twenty years.

At the age of sixty, Michael the collector decided to return to England. It was a painful wrench, but the East is inhospitable to the elderly; he was now a wealthy man, and realised that his day's work was over, and the younger generation was thundering at the gate. Accordingly he took leave of his Club and his old associates—who fêted him with banquets, bewildered him with speeches and overwhelmed him with their regrets. The homeward bound merchant heaved a heavy sigh, as he watched the tall Shadweisham lighthouse sink below the horizon. Oh, if he were but arriving, not departing from the golden East—and had still those thirty-eight good years to spend and enjoy! After a prosperous voyage—attended by one Chinese boy, and accompanied by many crates of valuable porcelain, he landed at Southampton, one fine July afternoon, not positively certain as to the destiny of either his treasures or himself.

As the Dargans' house and estates had been sold under

the Irish Land Act, he fixed upon London as his future home, and here, by the advice of a brother merchant, he, after many hopes deferred and fruitless searches, decided to buy the lease and part of the furniture of one of the finest houses in Bedford Square. The rooms were large, lofty, and imposing, at last he had found a suitable home for his priceless collection—and, incidentally, its owner.

The mansion selected to have the honour of holding the Dargan treasures was situated at a corner; a massive, exclusive-looking building, that seemed to say, "Great things have happened within these walls, but I hold my tongue." The house ran back a considerable way, the distance from the three front drawing-room windows to the vast bow in the rear must have been at least one hundred feet; a residence with sixteen bedrooms—of all sorts and sizes—and five reception-rooms, seemed unnecessarily large for a small family, but Michael Dargan required space, and enjoyed importance. Number 202 was of a rusty colour, with long, prim lines, and appeared to be in excellent repair, no particular history was attached to the premises—no brass plate indicated that it had been the abode of a celebrity, but its tenants were invariably rich and influential people, and 202, like the best towns, had no history—so said the agent. The milkman, however, told another tale, and declared that the house was "unlucky and haunted," but such slander is the common fate of a dignified old mansion, with a reserved aspect and an unimpeachable credit.

As soon as Michael Dargan's business arrangements were concluded, he summoned his widowed sister, Henrietta, to join him as companion and housekeeper. The Honourable Mrs. Toler had no family, but lived very contentedly in a charming cottage, under the warm and sheltering wing of her husband's relations. Both the old and young people at the Court were attached to "Aunt Henny," who had a sweet, unselfish nature. shared their joys and sorrows, was a capital bridge and

croquet player, and thoroughly at home in the circle which she had entered as a lovely Irish bride.

To Aunt Henny, London and the tall imposing mansion had at first seemed strange and overpowering, also the weight of housekeeping, but she soon settled down, sought out various friends, joined a fashionable Bridge Club, and inaugurated delightful little teas and luncheon parties in "the Square." As for her brother Michael, he put in his time attending important sales of china, playing golf, or amusing himself at the Oriental Club with billiards and picquet.

Jean, the orphan niece, aged seventeen, still attended classes, and was the one bright inmate in this somewhat gloomy household.

* * * * *

At last, after a considerable wait, the door was opened by a tall butler, with a long, red, clean-shaven face. (He and the cook, Mrs. Webb, had been taken over with the lease and furniture from the representatives of the defunct tenant.) His master's furious pull at the bell had disturbed Johnson, whilst enjoying one of that gentleman's best cigars. Unfortunately Johnson entirely lacked that bland and paternal quality commonly ascribed to family retainers, and he audibly cursed the old fool for forgetting his latch-key.

The hall was lofty; a graceful Adam staircase faced the entrance; two tall mahogany doors to the left opened into spacious sitting-rooms; a morning-room in front, a library at the back. A corridor close to the staircase led to an annexe and the dining-room. From this corridor, emerged Mrs. Toler, a stout, middle aged, but still pretty woman, with small, clear-cut features, and the remains of a beautiful complexion. She was wearing her out-of-door garments—a smart velvet toque, and a short fur coat—exceedingly unbecoming to her tub-like figure.

"Oh, Michael!" she exclaimed, beaming on her

brother, "I see you have been buying another treasure, a bargain, I hope?"

"No," he snarled, for he happened to be in a bad humour, knowing in his critical heart that he had paid a ridiculous price for this particular piece of porcelain. Unfortunately he had been carried away by a stern determination not to allow that chap Cummings—a hated rival—to secure this exquisite little blue jar, and naturally Cummings had run him up.

"Where have you been?" he demanded brusquely.

"Playing bridge, and losing your money?"

"Bridge—yes, I was at Lady Potter's," she answered, "and I won two rubbers—and cleared fifteen shillings."

Just at this moment the electric light was turned on, over the first landing, when it illuminated the slim figure of a young girl in a short white frock. She had exquisite ankles, a small eager face, and clouds of reddish hair.

"Hullo, Jean!" exclaimed her uncle encouragingly.

"Oh, what a darling little parcel! Chocolates for *me*?" beginning to run lightly down.

"Certainly not, you will turn into a chocolate one of these days!" Then sternly addressing his sister, and speaking with slow precision. "Henrietta, I call this child's frocks scandalously short, why don't you see to it?"

"It's quite regulation, Uncle Mick," protested the girl, with an audacious laugh, "and of course you needn't look at my legs unless you like."

"Legs indeed!" he snorted, "spindle shanks! Pipe-sticks!"

"Not a bit of it; no one at the dancing class has better understandings—behold and judge!" And she whipped up her frock to the knee, and boldly thrust forward an admirable model of a young girl's extremity encased in black silk.

"Jean! Jean! for shame!" protested her aunt in a shocked voice. "Supposing Johnson had come along." Then turning to her brother. "And what is your prize?"

"Oh, just a little bit of Khang He, with the marks enclosed in a double ring, but it's no use describing it to *you*, who know no more about china than the umbrella-stand. I'll go up and put it away in the drawing-room."

"Well, do not be too long arranging it—I know your ways—for Lizzie Brune is coming to dine and play a game of chess."

"Umph!" he growled, "is she?"

"There is a nice piece of Irish salmon."

"Come, that's better!" was his ungallant remark, as he hurried upstairs. Half-way he halted, and called back, "I bet a sovereign you never thought of the cucumber."

"Right you are!" responded his sister, with an unconcerned laugh.

"Ugh! just like you," he muttered, as he ascended to the landing, and entered a large, beautifully proportioned drawing-room, furnished in the French fashion, with dainty satinwood tables, gilded chairs and settees, and tall elegant mirrors; the parquet floors were partly covered with pale Persian rugs of fabulous age; the colour of walls and curtains was faint and subdued—a delicate shade of yellow; and everything in the rooms, from the fire-irons to the chandeliers, was subordinate to a magnificent display of Oriental china. Here were gigantic jars, guarding two lofty marble fire-places; the mantelpieces were loaded with porcelain and jade; the tall, open "show," and lacquer cabinets, which stood between the three windows, held matchless treasures. Indeed, it had been declared by a well-known connoisseur, that exhibited within these two rooms was at least thirty thousand pounds worth of Oriental porcelain.

Behold rare specimens of "Famille Rose," and "Famille Vert," "Sang de Boeuf," "Long Eliza," transparent egg-shell, and solid Nankin—not to speak of vases of the Kang He period, early specimens of Ming, dozens of superb ginger-jars, gilt lacquer boxes, smoke bottles, pieces of glass in two colours—and jade.

With reverential hands, and a sigh of profound contentment, the latest acquisition was deposited in a prominent place, in a red lacquer cabinet—being like the youngest edition to a family, especially favoured for a time! The little powder blue jar was turned, and fondled and adjusted, and contemplated by the new owner, who presently sat down to gloat over his possessions, and occasionally—a fixed habit—to slowly rub his chin. Yes! he had in his collection one or two pieces that outrivalled the Salter Show in South Kensington. He remained so long gazing at and worshipping his Chinese gods, that he was considerably startled when a French clock on the chimneypiece chimed out half-past seven.

“By gad, and he had not changed!” springing to his feet, and taking the room and stairs in active long-legged strides.

When, twenty minutes later, Dargan descended to the library, he found that his guest had already arrived, and was seated on a Chesterfield beside her hostess. It should here be stated that there was no reason whatever for his scornful “Umph.” Mrs. Beaufort Brune—known to her intimates as “Lizzie”—was the widow of an Indian officer, and the impersonation of brightness and grace. Aged about forty, but in some lights and some hats, looking not a day more than thirty, she lived in a flat not far from the Square, along with her young-old Anglo-Indian mother—both renowned bridge players. She and Mrs. Toler happened to be members of the same Club, “The Nine of Hearts,” and had there cemented a really warm friendship; in fact, they had several tastes in common—cards, clothes, and conversation. Lizzie Brune, who chattered to amuse herself and others, was not exactly pretty, but what was quite as effective, unusually vivacious and picturesque. Her beautiful, crinkly brown hair lent itself to any arrangement, and made a charming frame to her animated face. It was true that her mouth was an “outside size,” but then her teeth were white and regular, her eyes were also large,

of a light grey shade, with rather small pupils and very black lashes. Occasionally under stress of unusual excitement the eyes looked black too! Her vivacity was inexhaustible, she seemed to be charged with good spirits, good stories, good nature, and her stock of enthusiasm was unlimited. Agreeable to see and to hear, Lizzie Brune proved a veritable tonic or restorative in her own particular set, where she had many friends.

Big-boned, morose, and generally silent, Michael Dargan liked the little chattering widow better than he admitted; she was such a complete and refreshing contrast to himself; she never bored, never rubbed the bear the wrong way, but entertained and stimulated this grumpy old bachelor, and dined in the Square at least once a week.

CHAPTER II

"THE YOUNG PERSON"

IN spite of his abrupt, and occasionally bearish manners, it would have been difficult to mistake Michael Dargan for anything but a gentleman. In his smart dinner-coat, glazed shirt-front, and carefully manipulated black tie, he looked a spruce, brisk, middle-aged individual—who was evidently impatient for his food. With a muttered apology he offered an arm to his guest, and with somewhat greedy haste conducted her down the long passage leading to the dining-room; he liked the scent she wore—it recalled in some subtle manner, various delicious memories of the far-away and beloved East. He liked the feel of her delicate hand—she had lovely hands—lightly resting on his coat-sleeve; in short, he approved of the lady altogether, but kept these sentiments locked within his own breast. The dining-room was spacious, the walls a deep red, were hung with old coloured Japanese prints from Yedo; a few bronze ornaments and incense-burners of quaint designs were to be seen; also a pair of magnificent Cloisonné jars; but strange to say, no china. This plain, handsomely furnished apartment was solely dedicated to the important business of eating and drinking. No flowers decorated the board, merely the usual spoons, forks, and four large silver salt-cellars, posted on duty at the corners. The dinner itself was equally simple, it being Mrs. Toler's desire to have everything plain and good; she was, to tell the truth, a somewhat lethargic house-keeper, without initiative or imagination, and went

in deadly fear of Mrs. Webb, the ruling spirit in the lower regions, whose ideas as to cooking, *ménus*, and hours, were slavishly accepted by her mistress. To-night the fare consisted of clear soup, salmon—as foreshadowed—a leg of roast mutton, and a cabinet pudding. There were neither *entrées* nor *savouries*, as Mrs. Webb set her rugged face sternly against such kickshaws; a dish of oranges and another of bananas supplied the simple dessert. The overhanging electric lamp, veiled in a red silk petticoat, shed a strong and rosy light upon the little company of four: at the head of the table sat Dargan, glum and hungry, his sister faced him, stout, complacent, and still good-looking, wearing a black brocaded gown, with a short-waisted V-shaped bodice, and heavy mosaic ornaments—a wedding-present—plain and good. To her left sat Jean, in a white frock, her hair hanging in a heavy plait, her little, vivid face full of intelligence and curiosity: last, but not least, Mrs. Brune—an undeniably striking vision in a dainty green gown, the colour of young tulip leaves—veiled about the arms and bust with soft lace and knots of black velvet; she also wore a green ribbon twisted in her hair, a long chain of jade beads, and some quaint Indian bangles—jewellery was her weakness. Of the three ladies present, there was one whose day had come and gone, one whose day had yet to dawn, and one, who although forty years of age, believed that Time had yet some good gifts in store for her. She and Henrietta Toler discoursed vivaciously of shopping and bridge, until the host had stayed his appetite with salmon and roast mutton, and his heart had been warmed and cheered with a couple of glasses of Volnay. The cellar was exclusively in his own hands—as he believed—key included. By the time the cabinet pudding had made its appearance and disappearance, he was taking a prominent part in the conversation, assuring Mrs. Brune, in a tone of loud authority, that her string of green beads were not jade, but bottle-glass, chaffing her about a certain good-looking curate, and listening to her news and adventures.

These she related with considerable gesticulation, and her obvious enjoyment of her own experiences was equally amusing and infectious.

"A proud mother that I met to-day in Harrods' told me an anecdote of her little son," began Mrs. Brune.

"What was the miracle?"

"The child asked her to tell him a nice story out of the Bible, and she related the tale of the 'Garden of Eden,' and drew a brilliant picture of the sweet flowers, delicious fruit, and beautiful animals, finally the catastrophe of Eve, and its sequel. When she had concluded, the boy seemed thoughtful, at last he said: 'Do you know, Mummy, I should have done just what Eve did—and eaten the apple!'

"Oh, my son, but why?" inquired his mother.

"Because, if I had refused, of course the serpent would have eaten *me*! Father says serpents are awfully dangerous!"

"A new light thrown on the Book of Genesis by a child of four," concluded Mrs. Brune. "I feel sure that that boy will go far!"

"The farther the better!" growled Dargan. "I hate and abhor boys, mischievous little brutes! I never allow one within these doors. Why, I believe his mere presence, or the sound of his voice, would crack my best Egg-shell china!"

"What about girls?" demanded Jean. "What about *me*?"

"Oh, you and your impudence are only tolerated because you are a handy monkey, and because I can trust you to dust the big jars and earn half-a-crown a week."

"Half-a-crown a week is not nearly enough, Uncle Michael, I am going to strike for a rise!"

"A rise you won't get, oh daughter of the horse-leech," retorted Dargan, shaking a well-covered square head. At the moment he happened to be engaged in peeling an orange for Mrs. Brune—a mark of special favour.

"Have you ever had a serious accident?" she inquired.
"A grand crash?"

"No, thanks to the great gods of China! Once Henrietta let slip a bowl, it was cracked, not broken, and once I knocked the handle off one of my best Puzzle tea-pots. If anyone were to smash my Mandarin jars, I'm afraid I'd commit murder. I dust all the small delicate specimens, and the really valuable pieces, twice a week."

"Oh, I wish you could see Uncle Michael!" broke in Jean, "he does look so funny, in a long padded Chinese coat, and a little black skull cap."

"Shut up, Jean," he said sharply. "Your tongue is yards longer than my Chinese coat. Yes, the dusting is rather a heavy job, but I can't trust Evans, the housemaid, she's so shaky and nervous. On one occasion I gave her a jar to hold, and casually mentioned that it was worth a hundred pounds, whereupon her panic was such that she actually sat down upon the floor. However, she does a good share of the scrub work."

"Five hours a day," interpolated Aunt Henny. "I think, that like Jean, she intends to strike for a rise."

"Tell me, great Mandarin, what do you consider your principal treasure?" inquired the little widow, "the one, that if broken, would also break your heart?"

"Oh, my dear lady, I have so *many*, some absolutely unique," rejoined the collector, now stirred to a certain amount of animation. "The best is a rare example of Suen-Tik Ming—two jars, with delicate flowers in pale blue, and red fish moulded handles—you know them?"

Mrs. Brune listening with fascinated attention, nodded her head with simulated enthusiasm—and longed to yawn.

"Then there are those tall conical vases in black—'Famille noir,' exquisitely decorated with panels in peach blossom and bamboo; a couple of large Mandarin jars with the lotus flower, and storks wading in water—they are mounted in old French ormolu, and stand on a table by themselves—and"—lowering his voice with a swift glance at Henny—"cost me a small fortune."

"Oh, you wicked, wicked Mandarin!" the little widow whispered back—accompanying the whisper with a glance of coquettish significance.

"There is a little bit of blue 'Kang He' I got not long ago—perfect in its form and finish with the double mark of rings. I prize that enormously. I was afraid, when I bought it, I'd been rather done; since then, I've realised that I've secured a great prize. There was only one example in the Huth Sale. My little blue jar is almost as rare as the Great Auk's egg. Then there is one piece—they haven't its match in the British Museum—a specimen, which I bought in the shop of an old coffin-maker at Tien Sien—he actually kept glue in it, and was delighted to part with the bowl for a dollar! I believe," now speaking with impressive solemnity, "that it's worth every penny of seven hundred pounds."

"Oh, you must show it to me," cried Mrs. Brune. "Is it very beautiful?"

"No, rather ugly than otherwise, but it's tremendously old—eighth century—it has got the mark." And as he made the announcement his sunken eyes glittered, and he added, "Were anyone to break this piece, which is a thousand years old, I declare they'd deserve the 'Ling-chih' which means, '*death by a thousand slices!*'"

"Oh, you cruel, blood-thirsty Mandarin," began Mrs. Brune—but she was interrupted by Jean calling out:

"So you took advantage of the Chinaman's ignorance. Oh, fie! Uncle Michael, how could you?"

"You shut up, Miss Impudence," he retorted with a savage glance. "You go beyond the limit—and take advantage of my forbearance."

As a result of this outburst, Jean sat for some time, pink and silent, with a slight quivering of the lower lip—it was not often that Uncle Michael snubbed her in public.

"Ah, well, I suppose all's fair in collecting, as in love and war," interposed Mrs. Brune, in her caressing contralto.

"That's true; and if once or twice I *have* unearthed

a great find, it has to recoup me for many shocking disappointments. At first I was let in right and left ; these rare old bowls are so often faked—but the coffin-maker's glue-pot was the real thing. I consider it my rarest, but not my most valuable piece."

"And what is that?"

"The long, blue jar, with pink blossoms, and silver pheasants—that was no bargain, but I felt obliged to have it ; if I had let it go I'd never have had a night's real rest. That jar would have haunted me, and lain upon my conscience like a crime."

"What a thorough-going enthusiast you are ! Allow me to drink long, long life to your precious collection," said Mrs. Brune, raising her glass, and considering him with dancing eyes.

"Long life," he repeated with a harsh laugh, "why some of them are already hundreds of years old ; and each year they survive, increases their value."

"Not like us poor humans," said Mrs. Toler, "who deteriorate every hour—that is to say after a certain age——"

"What age?" inquired Jean, the irrepressible.

"In your case after ten," promptly responded her uncle, "you are twice as saucy, inquisitive, and impudent as you were seven years ago."

Mrs. Toler now made a move, saying as she rose :

"Well, Michael, we will leave you to smoke—it's nine o'clock, I see ; don't stay too long, Lizzie is looking forward to a grand battle—you will find us all in the library," she concluded as he held the door open, and the ladies filed out.

When they emerged into the front hall, Johnson approached, and said to his mistress in a low, mysterious voice :

"A young person has called, and wishes to see you."

"To see me—what at this hour ! There must be some mistake. What is she like ? Did she give you her name?"

"She looks like a dressmaker, ma'am, but she would not give me her name—nor her business,"—Johnson's tone was distinctly resentful—"as she seemed soaking wet, I left her sitting in the outer hall."

"Oh well, bring in the coffee immediately, and I will see her afterwards," and having issued this command, Mrs. Toler waddled into the library.

The library was a pleasant apartment, entirely surrounded by low, well-filled book-cases, furnished with large writing-tables, inviting arm-chairs, and two luxurious Chesterfield sofas. This was Michael Dargan's special "den"—so he called it—but it had nothing in common with what is usually known as the lair of the master of the house. It was the retreat of a man with cultivated tastes—literary and otherwise—and a sincere appreciation of comfort.

"I expect it's the dressmaker that Lady Dillon was speaking about," said Mrs. Toler, sipping her *café noir*, "but such an hour to come, and what a night!"

When Johnson entered to remove the coffee cups, and Jean had slipped away to bed, her aunt said, "I'll see the young person now—show her in here."

In a very short time, Johnson had returned, and throwing the door open with a flourish, announced:

"Miss Vole!"

Miss Vole was a tall young woman of about six and twenty, with a pale, strained face, and wide apart, light brown eyes. She was wearing a long dark coat, a soft felt hat, and both were wet.

On hearing the name of "Vole," Mrs. Toler had struggled out of her arm-chair; her face wore a frightened expression, and had become uncommonly red; but before she could utter a syllable, the girl hastily approached her with outstretched hands, and said in a stifled voice:

"Oh! Aunt Henrietta, I'm in terrible trouble! Please don't disown me, and turn me out!"

"Aunt Henrietta!" repeated Mrs. Toler, as she drew back. "What on earth do you mean?"

"I am your niece—your sister Julia's child."

A pause during which her aunt looked half paralysed by this announcement. At last she said: "Well, you may be, for all I know—but why do you come *here*?" And Mrs. Toler surveyed the girl with steady, searching eyes. "Your uncle will not allow you to remain under his roof—surely you must realise that?"

"Yes, yes; I know that the sins of the fathers and mothers are visited on the children, but both my parents are dead, and I would never have ventured within miles of you, but I had no alternative. If you refuse me a night's shelter—one night is all I ask—I'll have to sleep in the Square!"

Mrs. Brune, who had been looking and listening, as she lounged on the Chesterfield, now made a hasty motion to rise and withdraw.

"I see that this is a family affair," she murmured.

"And so I'll remove myself."

"No, no, no, my dear Lizzie," protested Mrs. Toler,

"You must remain—I may want you as a witness."

"Pray do not leave on my account," urged the stranger.

"I'm nobody that counts—only the skeleton in the cupboard," she explained, with a queer little crooked smile.

With her quick, light-brown eyes she surveyed the elegant lady on the sofa, so completely at home, and at ease—what a contrast to herself!—a contrast she instinctively resented—she, the near relation, ignored and repudiated, the other, an honoured guest; she conceived a dislike to her on the spot!

"May I ask what brought you down upon us to-night like a bolt from the blue?" demanded Mrs. Toler.

"A most desperate necessity," rejoined the girl. "I am penniless, I was on my way from Scotland to a friend in Buckinghamshire, and in the crowd at King's Cross, my handbag with all my money was snatched from me—"

the thief got away—and I was, of course, stranded. At first I thought of sitting in the station all night; next I thought of *you*. I happened to know your address, and as I had a few loose coppers in my pocket, I left my luggage at the cloak-room, and walked here. If you will allow me to remain, and lend me ten shillings, I'll promise you most solemnly that I shall never, never trouble you again. I am dead tired, after a long journey—all the way from Inverness—and even if you were to advance me money, I feel too exhausted to go out and search for a room to night—I shall only stay a few hours"—she paused, her voice was peculiarly clear and incisive—there was no suspicion of a whine in its silvery ring; anyone viewing the scene, would suppose, that of the two in the centre of the room, the tall, slim figure in the long, frieze coat, and collapsed bunched-up lady in the arm-chair, the former was mistress of the situation! At last Mrs. Toler recovered speech.

"You are possibly unaware, that this is not *my* house, and I cannot say what my brother will do," as she spoke, she surveyed her niece with an expression of terrified perplexity.

"Perhaps you will kindly find out?" suggested the girl, with staggering composure.

During this dialogue, Mrs. Brune had been considering Miss Vole with the closest attention—the Dargans' niece was undoubtedly a young woman with a full share of self-confidence, and pluck; as to her appearance, being tired, damp, and draggled, naturally she was not at her best, but her claims to good looks were doubtful. Her small, white face was broad across the cheek bones, her chin was pointed, the jaw long; her eyes light-brown, and very keen, were set a little obliquely under delicately marked black brows; her nose was rather flat, but her mouth was perfection! Hair, complexion, and teeth, were a possible—but unknown—asset, not to be fitly judged upon the present occasion.

As Mrs. Toler still remained seated, the girl came

nearer, stooped, and lifting her fat, limp hand, kissed it, as if it were some holy relic.

"Please go, Aunt Henrietta; I know you will help me—you have such a sweet, kind face"—her eyes seemed to search, and to plead.

When the tall, mahogany door had closed upon the broad back of a flattered emissary, her niece sat down in the vacant chair, and with a sigh of profound relief, began to remove her damp and wrinkled gloves—apparently assuming that she was to remain. Then suddenly turning to Mrs. Brune, she said:

"Naturally I'm a bomb-shell! Of course, you have never heard of me—or that the Dargans had a sister?"

"Oh dear, yes, Henrietta and I are very intimate—she told me your mother had made a runaway match——"

"These runaway matches are hard on the children. I have been knocking about the world for years; my father was half foreign, and had a fascinating personality, but peculiar ideas about money—and he was a gambler to the marrow of his bones."

"Not a comfortable parent!" remarked Mrs. Brune.

"No, one year we would be millionaires, and the next paupers; but out of this up-and-down existence, I managed to snatch a good education—which has been a great help. I came home from South Africa two years ago, to seek my fortune."

"And apparently, it's still to seek? You have had no luck?"

"No, I have few friends in England; none with money or influence, and"—suddenly stretching out an ugly little hand—"you see how my relations love me!"

"Your aunt would love you; you may depend upon her, she has such a warm heart, and is fond of young people. Your uncle——" she paused, and smiled to herself.

"Oh, my uncle—the rich Shanghai merchant," said the girl. "Is he fond of young people?"

"Well, he is rather a rough diamond, I must confess;

but for all his growling and brusqueness—a gentleman and generous; his bark is worse than his bite; indeed, I am not sure that he *can* bite—he is a man of taste too."

"Yes—a well-known collector of blue china."

"He appreciates music, and books—is mildly interested in politics and the literature of the day."

"And very rich, I believe?" supplemented her companion.

"So people say," admitted Mrs. Brune, with a vague expression.

During this conversation, a yet more animated dialogue was taking place in the dining-room, where Henrietta, with a beating heart had faltered out the name of her visitor. On hearing this name, Michael had started so violently, that he jerked over his last glass of port, and suffered the good, red wine to drip upon the carpet.

"What—Mimi Vole here—Vole's daughter!" he paused, and glared at his sister, then glanced at the bell. "Turn her out, at once—this moment—I won't have a Vole under *my* roof. I should think you might know that. What brought her?"

With a tremulous voice, Henrietta explained the circumstances of the case—and how the girl was homeless, for this night only.

"She has a friend at Chesham—and will go there to-morrow morning."

"But how do you know who she is?" he demanded. "Probably some spy and impostor—with an eye to the plate, and *china*!"

"No, no, she's a Dargan; heredity is a wonderful help, the girl has the slanting eye, and fine black brows of our grandmother."

"Who, by all accounts, was a mischievous, managing, treacherous old firebrand. And so this stranger who demands lodging and entertainment is in a tight place?"

"Only temporarily; she has a clever face, and the self-possession and manners of a well-born girl—no tight place will hold her long!"

"Her father was one of the greatest scoundrels that ever breathed, for all his aristocratic airs; I believe he had actually done time in a French jail."

"No, no," protested Mrs. Toler, "*that* was never proved, and after all, she is Julia's child."

"And Vole's daughter," he snarled. "You will remember how he robbed all the poor gentry in our neighbourhood—curates and widows and orphans, tempting them with his silver shares; and when he had stripped them stark naked, bolted out of the country."

"But Michael, this girl was not born in those days," urged his sister, who, flushed and tearful, leant her hands on the table, and looked at him with imploring eyes.

"A monstrous pity she was ever born! 'What's bred in the bone'—Well, well, well," now pouring out another glass of port. "I suppose you must have your own way, Henny—but mind you—only for one night—and don't let me come across her—that's all I have got to say. Where is she now?" he demanded roughly.

"In the library, with Lizzie. I'll take her upstairs at once."

"All right then, I'll give you just five minutes' start—I want to have my game of chess, before it's too late."

CHAPTER III

THE LITTLE WIDOW

MR. DARGAN, and the lady—whom in an occasional burst of *bonhomie*—he addressed as "*belle amie*," seated themselves at a small table, and began to arrange the chess men—on her part a leisurely proceeding—as it offered her an opportunity to display her exquisite hands, and to coquette a little with her partner—who accepted her efforts with luxurious condescension. Regarding the game of chess, she was but a moderate performer, and talked far too much as she pondered and moved pieces; to tell the truth, her tongue was seldom given a rest, save when she was asleep—indeed, she may have talked then—who knows? Her gay prattle, her stimulating vivacity, and her pretty hands, reconciled Dargan to her foolish and futile performances—he could always get a good game with old Tarleton at the club—old Tarleton, who merely grunted, and whose fingers were swollen with gout. By and by Mrs. Brune touched a little timidly on the subject of the new arrival; somehow the subject held a fearful fascination, and in spite of Dargan's contemptuous silence and occasional growls, she returned to it from time to time—precisely as a moth to a candle. Such were her powers of blandishment, that she eventually stirred her companion's interest; so well had she described the stranger, she awoke his dormant curiosity, and roused in his mind a desire to behold (of course surreptitiously) his unknown kinswoman and niece.

"So you think she has a distinguished air?" he said, lifting away a pawn, "and how did she strike you otherwise?"

"As a forlorn and friendless young woman."

"Ah!" drawing a long breath, "and *not* good-looking?"

"Well, it would be unfair to judge; she was wet and tired after a long railway journey, and walking here all the way from King's Cross."

"By Jove, no wonder she looked played out! She is dark, of course?"

"On the contrary, rather fair. She has a sort of light brown honey-coloured hair and eyes, and what I call rather an elfish face."

"Elfish!" he echoed, "you mean selfish, my dear lady?"

"No, no, you know what I mean; that type with a pointed chin: and mouth, and eyes curled up at the corners."

"By George, she must be a funny specimen!"

"I don't know about funny—but it struck me that she had rather a mocking expression—you'll soon see for yourself."

"No, I'm not going to see her at all—she leaves this house early to-morrow morning—at what they call the streak of dawn—and that is as sure as my name is Dargan."

"Oh, you cruel Mandarin! How can you be so hard-hearted and implacable! I think you might allow her to stay over the week-end! Please do! Have you forgotten that to-morrow will be Sunday? Well, there's eleven o'clock striking—how the time has flown, and you have given me a most shocking beating. I must be off," she added, rising with a rustle. "No, I shall not allow you to take me home to-night, it's raining cats and dogs. I'll get Johnson to whistle for a taxi, but you *may* come and help me into my fur coat and overshoes."

* * * * *

As soon as the Mandarin had sped his charming guest, he re-entered the library, where he found Henrietta awaiting him.

"Well!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into a luxurious chair and stretching out his long legs.

"I've had a talk with that girl," announced his sister nervously, fingering as she spoke a precious ornament on the chimney-piece, "her Christian name is Mimi—called after our mother, you see; poor thing, I do feel for her—Julia's daughter."

"We've only her own word for that!" objected Dargan.

"Oh, Michael, how hard you *pretend* to be; if you had only heard her story, I'm sure you would have believed her."

"Vole was a magnificent liar—Munchausen wasn't in it—his methods were far more artistic. He made hundreds of people believe in his fables and suffer cruelly for their folly. If the girl is Julia's daughter, I'll bet she has her father's persuasive tongue."

"Not at all; on the contrary, she is disposed to be silent and reserved; I had to drag out every word as if with pincers."

"And what did you get for your trouble?"

"Well, something——"

"Come, then, let's have it," now fumbling for a match, and lighting a cigar.

"It seems that she has a brother older than herself."

"I hope to the Lord we won't have *him* dropping in here!"

"These children were born in Spain——"

"Yes, the country Vole went to ground in——"

"Micky, if you would only allow me to go straight on, I'd get it over so much quicker, and better."

"Oh, all right then, fire away."

"I gathered that the Voles were well off, and lived in Malaga and Barcelona for seven years or so—then came to England, still apparently prosperous; they had a fine

house in Onslow Gardens ; Julia kept her carriage—he had a big city business.”

“ Umph ! I know—playing the spider as usual ! ”

“ The girl and the boy seem to have been sent to school, and when Mimi was about sixteen, they all went off rather suddenly to South Africa—their father had lost a great deal of money.”

“ Other people’s money, of course—that’s understood ! ”

“ At first they were desperately hard up, but by gradual degrees, became wealthy, and lived in style in Johannesburg or Wynberg. When Mimi was about twenty-one her father was killed in a motor accident, and they found themselves unexpectedly poor, his affairs being left in great confusion. Then Julia, hitherto only a society woman, took the reins, sold off her jewellery, horses, and furniture, and started a hotel at Durban—and the boy went into an office at the Cape. The hotel became fashionable, and paid well. Mimi kept the books, and acted as ‘ receptionist,’ all was going splendidly till her mother died of heart disease, and the hotel had to be closed. Then her brother, who had leased a mealie farm in Portuguese Africa, married a Cape girl with money, and offered her a home, but Mimi found herself one too many ; her sister-in-law made her life unbearable, and compelled her to work like two servants ; she was tyrannical, ill-tempered, and grasping, but being remarkably pretty could turn her husband round her little finger. So after a miserable six months Mimi decided that it would be easier and pleasanter to earn her own living. There was a fearful scene with her sister-in-law, who naturally had no wish to lose an unpaid cook and house-keeper. Two years ago the girl came to England, where, thanks to a South African friend, she immediately found a situation as companion to a wealthy old lady in Scotland ; this old woman died ten days ago, the establishment has been broken up, and Mimi was on her way to Chesham—where a former servant keeps a lodging-house—intending to rest herself after a strenuous spell of nursing.

But at King's Cross, a man in the crowd wrenched her bag out of her hand, and vanished without a trace—and the bag contained all she possessed."

"How much?" he asked curtly.

"About twenty pounds, also letters of recommendation from the old lady's family, and the gift of a handsome watch bracelet."

"I suppose she has some savings?"

"No, I fancy not; she had only forty pounds a year and laundry, and was expected to dress particularly well—the old lady hinted at a legacy——"

"Oh, they all do that! And so the girl is practically penniless?"

"Temporarily penniless—a few pounds would start her; she will easily find another situation, she speaks French and Spanish fluently—can read aloud, typewrite, play accompaniments and dance."

"*Dance!*" he echoed with an expression of deep disgust.

"Yes, she learnt as a child in Spain, and says that it is her one real accomplishment and gift."

"Ah, so we may see her on the boards of the Gaiety or some of the halls before we have done with her."

"I don't think that would be in her line at all, though she is wonderfully graceful, and has a beautiful figure."

"But an ugly face on the top of it."

"Who says so?"

"Lizzie. At least she told me the girl had a queer sort of elfish expression—which means a wide mouth, a flat nose, and pointed ears."

"Oh, Lizzie was pulling your leg! The girl may stay, may she not?" her voice was pitifully eager. "She looks so ill and worried, and is terribly hurt in her pride at being obliged to apply to *you* for a night's lodging."

"Oh, she has pride, has she? Well, as this is Saturday night, I suppose we shall have to keep her till Monday, but mind you, it's not to be the thin end of the wedge."

"Of course not," assented Mrs. Toler with emphasis, "you'll see Mimi to-morrow, and decide for yourself. I always think you are such a wonderful judge of physiognomy and character," and with this sugared speech, Mrs. Toler wished her brother a fair good night, and took her departure.

CHAPTER IV

A KINDRED SPIRIT

ON Sunday morning, Evans the upper housemaid announced to Mrs. Toler that the young lady in the chintz bedroom had a touch of fever and a frightful headache, and asked if she might be excused from coming down to breakfast? Mrs. Toler immediately visited the invalid with effectual remedies, and commanded her to keep quiet and to take a good long rest. The result of this prescription was, that Miss Vole did not appear at luncheon, but tea-time found her in the morning-room, exquisitely groomed, and clothed in a neat blue serge, and an air of deferential self-possession.

Kind and thoughtful Aunt Henny had despatched Miller, her maid, for Miss Vole's luggage (a moderately-sized respectable box), and this had enabled its owner to make a brave appearance—for who is beyond the reach of her wardrobe?

She rose slowly when—oh, imminent moment—Michael Dargan entered the morning-room, and stood with her back to the light, a slender, graceful figure, with a pale face of uncommon type, and masses of beautifully dressed light hair. Here was a young woman who knew how to make the best of herself!

"This is Mimi," explained Mrs. Toler, pausing, cream-jug in hand.

"Oh!" ejaculated her brother, gravely surveying his new niece, and measuring her with sombre eyes.

"It is very kind of you to shelter me, Mr. Dargan," she murmured timidly.

"Oh, well, it's only for a couple of nights!" was his ungracious reply.

"But that means so *much*," she answered in her silvery tones, "it has given me time to take breath."

"Well, just now you had better take your tea," and handing her a cup as he spoke, he noted that she had nothing of the air of one consciously insignificant.

"And she might be handsome," he said to himself as he sat down and studied her critically, "rather uncommon looking and colourless—pale hair, pale skin—but what a figure!"

Erect against the light, her dark gown emphasised every sinuous line and curve—not a scrap like Julia, no, nor Vole, but she recalled an old portrait of a great grandmother in the Dargan drawing-room, a slim, beguiling young damsel—with a hawk on her wrist, and crafty eyes.

Presently as four or five Sunday visitors dropped in, and gathered about the tea-table, the girl quietly effaced herself (she had not been introduced, nor was she included in the general conversation) and drifted into the background where she became absorbed in contemplation of the precious contents of a French cabinet; so still and motionless was she, that her presence seemed to be forgotten. When talk ebbed and the lively company had passed on to yet another tea, Dargan approached his unknown niece, and said in his harsh, grating voice:

"You know nothing about this sort of thing, of course?"

After a second's perceptible hesitation:

"Well, yes, I do—a little," was her unexpected reply.

"At least, so you *think*!" and he gave a sardonic laugh. "Can you give a name to this?" thrusting his hand into the cabinet and offering her a specimen.

The girl turned it over deliberately, handling it with exquisite care, studied the mark, and said:

"Kang He period, 1622."

Dargan stared at her incredulously; if the bit of china

had spoken he could not have been more startled; his eyebrows and nostrils twitched—invariably a sign of extraordinary excitement.

"And this?" offering her yet another treasure.

"A Libation cup, I *think*; and oh, what a darling 'Blanc de Chine' crab!"

"How on earth did you get hold of this lore?"

"Oh, quite simply," she rejoined—carefully restoring the cup, and confronting him with an air of steady composure. "My employer, Mrs. Yates, was a collector—or rather she had inherited a collection—and it was part of my business to dust and wash the best pieces, and to write up and correct the catalogue."

"Catalogue!" he repeated. "Ah," he added with a groan, "that's where *I* fall short—mine is a muddle, and most infernally incomplete."

"That seems rather a pity," she remarked indifferently. "And besides the catalogue I was expected to read up sales, and prices, and keep Mrs. Yates *au courant* with the china fashion of the day. She was capricious; sometimes she was immensely keen about the collection, and again she would forget its existence altogether."

"Then she was not a serious collector—that's all I can say for her."

"Perhaps not, but she had other things to think about, and she was growing old."

"What was her particular line?" he asked imperiously.

"In porcelain, do you mean?"

An impatient nod was his reply.

"Entirely oriental. Some ancestor had brought home great treasures—possibly loot from the East."

"Ah, I wonder what *you* call 'treasures'?"

"There were a good many; for instance, a fine piece of the 'Cheng Te' period—that, I think, was the rarest. Two splendid jars of Mohammedan Blue, an egg shell glass lantern, and some Imperial Yellow, Wan Li porcelain."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "those were something like! Is the collection for sale?"

"No, it is an heirloom."

"Where is it? I'd like to see it!"

"Oh, up in Ross-shire—many hours' journey beyond Inverness."

"Ross-shire—that's a bit outside my beat. Do you know that I am a collector?"

"Yes, of course; I fancy that *most* people have heard of your wonderful blue china."

"What—even up in Ross-shire!" colouring to a deep brick shade with gratification and pride.

"Even there! I've been told that in some respects it is as fine as the Salter Bequest in South Kensington."

"No, no, no, that's absurd, that's too ridiculous! Worse still, it's sheer ignorance. You might as well talk of it in the same breath as the Banks, or Huth, collection."

But in spite of his repudiation, this intoxicating flattery was mounting to his brain.

"Why, my collection is as the moon to the sun! All the same, I have one or two bits that are not in the Museum—for, of course, as you may suppose, I had exceptional chances in China—poking round in ramshackle old towns, and waterside villages. For instance, I can show you an example that is absolutely unique, there's not its pair in Europe—a little jar of porcelain of the Ken Lung period."

Whilst this conversation was in progress, and Miss Vole listened to her uncle with becoming reverence, Mrs. Toler and Jean had looked on in stupefied amazement; here was another china expert! For the new cousin talked glibly of special dates, and marks, and glaze—a second maniac in the family would be a cruel infliction. On the other hand, this mutual taste must draw uncle and niece into fellowship and friendship—at least it might have that advantage.

This is what Mrs. Toler said to herself, as she made a sign to Jean that it was time to prepare for dinner, and

aunt and niece noiselessly quitted the room, leaving the enthusiasts to their own devices.

Mimi's expert knowledge of his treasures was to Michael Dargan as the discovery of a well of spring water in a barren and thirsty land ; he had always longed for some sympathy within his home, and here at last was a kindred spirit, actually under his own roof—temporary, of course. Hitherto, there had been no fellow-feeling for him around his hearthstone, and how he yearned for a companion to share his tastes, could scarcely be expressed ! Some capable friend with whom to discuss texture, age, marks, and glaze—someone to enter into his triumphs, and to deplore and mourn over his disappointments—alas, this someone's place was ever vacant !

His passion for Blue China was looked upon by his sister as a harmless, but expensive weakness ; she treated his hobby with motherly indulgence, and actually made profane jokes about "the crockery" among her intimates ; indeed, as far as Mrs. Toler was concerned, few would have suspected that the great double drawing-rooms held one of the finest collections of blue porcelain in the whole of London. She rarely entered the apartment, and received, and played Bridge in the morning-room below. Occasionally she would say in a laughing, bragging way :

"I believe there is thirty thousand pounds worth of china in this house. Michael gives deadly dull dinners to other cranks just to show off his collection ; for my own part, I look upon this mania as a shocking waste of money. Of course, it's Micky's money to do what he likes with ; but the craving for Blue China is like the craving for drink ! The more he has, the more he wants. When Michael has been away for a few weeks' fishing, he returns quite a reasonable being, but a big sale will start him off at once—madder than ever ! He has one vase—black—with silver pheasants, and pink cherry blossoms, for which he actually paid fourteen hundred pounds, so that will give you some idea of his lunacy. Supposing it were to be broken ! Imagine his state of

mind, for he loves china, not wisely but too well. As for me, it makes me quake to enter the drawing-room. I close the door *so* softly and generally walk on tiptoe, speak in a whisper, and *never* touch a thing ! ”

But Mrs. Toler's little niece was not such a coward, being remarkably deft and neat-fingered, she dusted courageously, with Canton silk handkerchiefs, and received half-a-crown a week for her pains. Jean took but scanty interest in her task ; the only specimens she admired were two life-like white rabbits and a contemplative brown stork—marvellous models of delicate handicraft.

Sprightly Mrs. Brune evinced profound interest in the great collection, asking many questions (and thereby displaying her ignorance), begging that each precious new piece might be introduced to her and explained ; but although so susceptible to flattery, some remnant of the hard-headed, far-seeing business man still lingered in Dargan's composition, and he felt that the enthusiasm of this charming widow was exaggerated—if not assumed. The little woman did not know Nankin from Spode, and was nearly as ignorant as Henrietta Toler, who could scarcely tell the difference between the willow pattern and “Famille Rose.” Now, on the other hand, this new-comer, his own niece, was undoubtedly a professional expert, and could actually spot Chinese Lowestoft !

“Yes, that girl knows all about it,” he said, addressing his own grim visage in the looking-glass, as he brushed his thick, grey hair, “and to think of her having artistic tastes, and being the daughter of that plundering scoundrel. I don't mind giving her a few pounds to start with, but I won't have her hanging on here ! And yet, it's a pity, for she handles china as if she loved it.”

CHAPTER V

TWO FRIENDS

MICHAEL DARGAN had two friends who dined in the "Square" every Sunday without ceremony or invitation; their names might have been registered as "Success" and "Failure."

Sir George Hayes, who embodied "Success," naturally comes first; portly and jovial, a contemporary, connection, and once playfellow of his host. Fortune had smiled on George Hayes; he had risen, step by step, to be a Colonial Governor—capable, and clear-headed, a capital organiser, an irresistible orator, and the very man for a big job or a big meeting. Having exercised his talents in the Colonies, with conspicuous results, he retired with a considerable fortune, and corresponding *éclat*; an elderly widower, enjoying the income of a rich wife, he had neither chick nor child, nor like his friend, a hobby, which filled the place of both. He occupied a luxurious flat in Whitehall Court, and extracted all that was possible out of the autumn days of a leisured life.

Sir George thoroughly appreciated a good dinner—well served—also a good story—and a good laugh. At the "Square," he suffered the mantle of a pro-consul to slip from his shoulders, and was never so dogmatic as elsewhere. His quick, brown eyes held a kindly twinkle, and his hand was (secretly) open to poor people and poor animals; his wits and ready tongue were still in good case. He was really attached to old Micky and Henny, and looked on the usual "Square" dinner as "an

evening at home." Such was George Hayes, a well-preserved veteran, enjoying excellent health, a serene conscience, and about £5,000 a year. So much for the man who had made a success of his career!

His melancholy contrast was Major Edgar Warren, late Royal Die Hards, a handsome, well set up, but worn looking officer, of say five and forty; well born, well bred, chronically poor—and more or less friendless. Dargan had known his people in China in the long ago, where General Warren held a fine appointment at Hong Kong, and had always kept up the acquaintance—perhaps because the General had once secured for him a wonderful pierced globe of "Chin Lung"—one of the gems of his collection. When the same officer retired on a pension and into idleness, he turned an optimistic eye on the City, plunged into stock jobbery and lost most of his capital. His son had, of course, entered the Service—joined in South Africa, and done well—receiving wounds, honourable mention, and a decoration. Later, in India, he distinguished himself as a smart officer, a first-rate polo player, and was known as "Polo Warren"; but a bad accident led to his being invalided and retired; and having his late mother's little fortune, he alas! followed in his father's footsteps, and took to speculation. By nature sanguine, an enthusiast, eloquent, and sincere, he had many friends. South Africa was the field—and subsequently proved to be the grave—of his fortunes. Being exceedingly inexperienced and trustful, he fell into the hands of a small band of specious thieves—apparently rich—who spent money lavishly, gave champagne dinners and owned high-powered cars. These caught Warren, the unsuspecting, in their toils; his air of distinction, his absolute faith in their investment, were an invaluable asset; at their instigation he made a second trip to South Africa, and returned full of good news and high hopes, and was altogether so urgent, active, and supremely convinced, that he persuaded half his friends to invest their money in "The World's End Railway."

The difference between Warren and Vole was this. Warren firmly believed in the value of an investment whose praises and advantages he continually set forth ; he urged his friends not to lose a splendid chance, which was to open up a valuable expanse of country, and sank every penny of his own small fortune in the speculation. Vole, on the other hand, deliberately laid himself out to ensnare and rob his associates, and subsequently carried his plunder beyond the reach of the long arm of the law. Within a few months "The World's End Railway" had collapsed in a swamp, shares descended from forty-five shillings to two pence ; the whole thing was a shameless fraud, engineered by unscrupulous sharpers, and Edgar Warren, their catspaw, found himself minus both money and friends. To touch a man's pocket is the most fatal of injuries. Warren, with his scanty pension, was now a genteel pauper ; he gave up his Club—this was no deprivation, for his comrades there cut him—he sold his guns and watch, gathered together his few belongings, and settled down into cheap rooms.

Here Michael Dargan heard of him, and held out, as far as Warren would accept it, a helping hand. Dargan wanted a younger man to assist him and write his letters—his own scrawl being almost indecipherable, and the cause of various painful losses, and mistakes—to report on distant sales, undertake disagreeable interviews, return and repudiate bad bargains, and generally act as representative and buffer. For this, Warren was to receive £100 a year, and what is vulgarly termed "the run of his teeth."

He did not avail himself of this latter privilege ; occasionally he remained to lunch, or joined Mrs. Toler's tea-table, and on Sunday he dined—probably his one good dinner in the week !

In spite of his poverty Major Warren was admirably turned out—thanks to a good tailor (men's clothes last, with care, and look presentable for years). Dargan

realised that in the case of Warren he had secured a bargain; Warren was so cool and self-possessed in interviews, so punctual and indefatigable, whether as scout or secretary; the fellow was quiet and reserved, his health seemed uncertain, but like a thoroughbred horse, he never flagged or required the spur, and was always on duty, whether to copy hieroglyphics or hand tea-cups.

He and Mrs. Toler had not much in common beyond good breeding and mutual regard. Little Jean was his particular chum and playfellow. He escorted her to the Zoo, to the Tower, to the pantomime, and park, and she ran in and out of his shabby rooms as she pleased; mended his gloves, ruined his pens, and called him "Warry."

* * * * *

The two weekly guests were momentarily expecting the announcement of dinner, when the door was gently opened, and to their amazement, admitted a tall, totally unknown young woman—a striking apparition, with quantities of effectively arranged fair hair, and arrayed in an elegant garment of cloud-like chiffon.

Major Warren instantly rose. So, with a struggle, did Sir George Hayes—thus forcing the ceremony of introduction upon Mrs. Toler.

"Sir George Hayes and Major Warren—Miss Vole," she murmured nervously, and Major Warren, who was nearer to the lady, ventured upon some weather small talk.

"Did your sister say *Vole*?" inquired the K.C.B., lowering his voice, "it's an uncommon name. I suppose you remember Anthony Vole—'Voleur' they called him, as he robbed all round, and played the very devil in one or two companies—then cleared out for Spain. He let me in for a cool thousand, but he was the sort of chap who could talk you out of your boots! What's become of him?"

"Oh, he's dead long ago," rejoined Dargan brusquely,

as with a sense of profound relief he beheld Johnson in the doorway announcing dinner.

"Hayes, will you take my sister, Warren—Miss Vole—Jean you shall escort me."

And thus paired off, the little company proceeded along the passage to the red dining-room. Although they were badly seated, so to speak, it proved a pleasant and sociable meal. The host placed himself between his schoolfellow and Jean, Mrs. Toler was supported by Major Warren and Mimi.

"What have you been doing with yourself to-day?" inquired Mrs. Toler, as she turned to her neighbour.

"I was lunching out with an old brother officer."

"I hate lunching out," declared Sir George. "a most unnatural entertainment; you eat too much, get red in the face, and remain torpid for the afternoon."

"Oh, speak for yourself, George," put in Dargan, "there's nothing either red or torpid about Warren, is there?"

Presently the friends' conversation turned towards the City and share list. Major Warren (to whom such a topic was naturally anathema) and Mrs. Toler discussed a commission which he had recently executed for her sister, Lady Tolerton—a small matter of shrubs from a nursery—and Mimi, having finished her soup, had time to look about; sitting silent and demure, she examined the company with a coy and cat-like expression.

This time last night she had been waiting in the hall, wet and dragged, and treated by that odious butler as if she were a begging impostor. To-night she had a place at her uncle's table—what a change for the better! Her thoughts were disturbed by Jean's clear, shrill voice inquiring:

"Miss Vole, you *are* my cousin, are you not?"

"Yes, I suppose I am," turning her eyes upon her questioner.

"Why, you must be—if you are Aunt Henny's niece

She says you have been in South Africa. How did you like it ? ”

“ Enormously at first—at other times—I loathed it.”

“ Do explain ! ”

“ Jean, you are incorrigible—do not tease,” interposed Mrs. Toler.

“ Oh, she is not teasing me,” protested Mimi. “ I liked South Africa,” she said, addressing her cousin, “ when I had horses to ride, and motors to drive, and went to balls, and all sorts of amusements—but I hated the country when I was poor.”

“ And what did you do when you were poor ? ”

“ My mother and I kept a hotel.”

This information was evidently a shock for Miss Jean Dargan, who had been in the habit of looking upon hotel-keepers as low people ; she coloured with astonishment, and her questions momentarily ceased. The gap was filled by Major Warren, who leaning a little towards her, said :

“ I, too, have been in South Africa, Miss Vole. I love the country—the clear air on the Veldt—and the Karoo.”

“ I suppose you were out there in the Boer War ? ”

“ Yes,” looking at her steadily ; he was about to add more, but refrained.

“ Ah, of course, that was long before *my* time.”

“ Where were you then ? ” put in the irrepressible.

“ At school—in London.”

“ Where was your school ? ”

Mrs. Toler looked fixedly at Jean who burst out laughing and said apologetically :

“ Oh, I know I’ve a dreadful habit of asking questions. They start out before I can stop them ; when I ask too many—you must treat me as Aunt Henny does—and take no notice.”

An animated discussion of a recent play now sprang up, and into this talk everyone thrust their opinion

except Mimi who maintained an attitude of observant silence, toyed with some grapes, and looked rather aloof and distinguished. As her uncle glanced at her he realised that his first impressions would require considerable readjustment. This girl was undoubtedly a Dargan, and bore an uncanny resemblance to his old great-grandmother. What a persistence of type!

Sir George Hayes, who had been in China, presently drifted away from the Gaiety Theatre, to spectacles in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

"When out 'in far Cathay' you were always keen on shows, Micky. I never admired your sing-song girls; too much whitened and painted and gummed; and their songs just a monotonous falsetto."

"Ah, you have no soul for music," retorted his friend.

"Chinese music, no, but there's lots to hear and see among the celestials."

Then Sir George entertained Jean with wonderful stories of the fishing cormorants, how each bird knew his own boat, and returned with full pouch to the summons of the rattan.

"And they cannot swallow their spoil," he explained, "as they wear an iron ring round their necks."

"Poor birds!" cried Jean, "after all their trouble—oh, what a shame."

To Mimi, who found favour in his eyes, Sir George described the beautiful country around Hoochoo, and was eloquent on the subject of the Blue Mountains, acres of peach trees in bloom, groves of azaleas, and limpid-green lakes.

"We had fine flocks of pheasants and wild ducks," he added, "I saw all this when I paid Dargan a flying visit a good many years ago."

"Uncle never tells *us* anything about China," said Jean. "Not a word about the flowers, and birds and old tombs, and pagodas and people."

"I'm not surprised at that," rejoined his friend with emphasis.

"Your uncle only remembers a place where he has picked up a fine piece of porcelain, and these are generally in the most filthy slums. As for the *people* he knew—I can tell you some queer tales about your brother when we are by ourselves!" and he winked significantly at Mrs. Toler.

"Come, come, that's enough about *me*!" interrupted Dargan with an uneasy laugh, "go on talking of Shanghai—leave me alone—you can't call *that* country beautiful—flat as a billiard-table!"

"Yes, but how rich and hospitable! You recollect our official dinners especially one with that chap at Yen—yes, you must, Micky—when we had Lotus soup, and ducks stewed in garlic—and *tea*. I nearly died of it, and the old man was so horrified to hear you had no wife, not even *one*!"

"Old fool!" muttered Dargan savagely.

"Nor any son to worship on your grave!"

"I don't want a son to worship on my grave. I shall leave a far more lasting monument in the Dargan collection of Blue China."

"A splendid memorial!" agreed Sir George. "By the way, talking of our dinners in China, I went shopping to-day and bought a dog—a pug. I say, Micky, I wonder you don't have one? I remember your two lovely Pekinese. Why not set up a fox-terrier to keep the cats away?"

"I've no use for dogs in London, and I hate the terrier breed, who always require to be exercised and amused."

"At least they are a fine sporting race," protested Warren, "better than a pampered Palace pet."

"Such as the sleeve dog of Pekin," added Sir George.

"But the Palace pet belongs to a much older civilisation. When we were roaming the forests, half naked savages, scraping ourselves with oysters shells—the Pekinese, of far Cathay, was reposing luxuriously among his silken cushions."

"I must say I should like a Pekinese," murmured Mrs. Toler. "Adelaide Seymoer has such a darling—they are so faithful, and affectionate."

"No dogs allowed here—unless made of china or iron," declared Dargan, then abruptly to his sister, "Henrietta, pass the port!"

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT COLLECTION

WHEN his guests had taken a somewhat early departure, Michael Dargan found Mimi and her aunt in the morning-room, with their heads together, poring over an A B C.

"I think your train leaves Paddington at 12.5," Mrs. Toler was saying, "and a taxi from here——"

"Never mind, Henny, you can worry that out by yourself," interrupted her brother, "I want Miss Vole to come up with me to the drawing-rooms—*she* knows Oriental china when she sees it!"

In obedience to this invitation or command, Mimi followed her uncle up the carpeted easy stairs, and did not fail to notice the two gigantic jars upon the landing. As they entered the front room, Dargan paused in the darkness for an appreciable moment, then suddenly turned on a blaze of light. A glittering glass chandelier depended from the ceiling in both drawing-rooms, lights in sconces shone by the fireplaces and between the windows; the effect of such illumination was dazzling; Mimi who felt blinded and bewildered, stood for a moment blinking her eyes, realising by degrees, the imposing size of the apartments; their decoration and furniture was undoubtedly the result of care and taste—whilst in some subtle, inexplicable way, the whole atmosphere breathed the languid sensual spirit of the Far East.

The notable collection was not too obtrusive, yet it was present in large cabinets, on wide mantelpieces, and on tables and shelves. Here a red-lacquer cabinet caught

the eye, there a shining gilt godema, a white figure, or a pair of superb vases.

As they halted in the middle of the room, Michael Dargan surveyed his collection, and then glanced at his companion with a child's open and unabashed triumph. As Mimi stood motionless and gazing in silence, he growled out:

"Well, what do you think of this?"

"It's too wonderful!" she answered, with a catch in her breath. "Of course I've not looked yet, but I realise that you have many treasures. For instance, do I not behold a piece of the precious 'Blue after Rain, Yuyao'?"

"Yes, I picked that up in a joss house for a couple of dollars. For this bit of 'Lang Lao,' which I bought at a sale I had to pay through the nose. Look at this globe of Chien Lung, honey-combed and ornamented. Come, I know I can trust you to handle my jewels. Now just examine *this*," and he tendered her a bit of transparent ruby porcelain. "What taste! What colouring! What delicate finish! It must have taken ten years to perfect. And observe this statuette of the Goddess Kwan-Yin—what modelling! Without this goddess, no collection is complete."

"Yes, so I have heard; and this exquisite Flambé plate with the peach blossom and lilies. It's almost *too* beautiful."

"Not more beautiful than this piece with the dragon mark—five claws—Imperial use only. I got it from a Chinese collector—a rich silk-man—at Ningpoo. The Chinese, as probably you don't know, are great collectors themselves."

As the couple proceeded very slowly round the two rooms, moving deliberately from cabinet to cabinet, they talked of porcelain, of single-coloured glaze, and under-coloured glaze, of dynasties, marks and factories, and the girl's knowledge secretly astounded her companion. They paused from time to time to examine and discuss dishes,

cups and Puzzle tea-pots, which Dargan kept turning and exhibiting with his big, bony hands; on each of these Mimi offered a timid, but sound opinion. Now it was a rich example of Ming Celadon, again a bowl of "Famille Noir"; in every instance Dargan expounded their history and value with an energy and eloquence, a readiness of speech that was a curious contrast to his usual pose of glum silence.

"Look at this exquisite vase of 'Kang He,'" he urged eagerly, "see how each leaf and branch has its scheme in decoration! Observe the plumage of the 'Ho Ho' birds, and the large peony, and this bold design of growing peach blossom. The peach blossom is, as you no doubt know, the flower of immortality."

Surely this was another individual than the man who had preceded Mimi up the stairs?—one who discoursed of flowers and immortality, and had a keen eye for beauty and art.

"You notice those two tall jars?" he asked, pointing to a prominent table. "They are perfect specimens of 'Mandarin,' decorated with dragons and flowers. Observe the exquisite delicacy of the work, possibly they cost thirty years of patience—and a man's eye-sight."

When Mimi had expressed her critical appreciation and admiration, he said:

"These vases ought by rights to be in a cabinet. They cost me a thousand pounds a-piece. My sister would have a fit if she knew their price. I keep them out for my own pleasure, so that I can see them and feast my eyes the moment I enter the room, and after all, we have neither cats nor clumsy servants, so they are in no danger."

"No, and it would be a shame to hide their beauty in a cabinet."

"Here is a little blue jar I picked up the other day," and he handed her his latest purchase. "You see, it is 'Kang He,' the best period, and has the double ring."

"Yes, it is a darling, a perfect gem."

"And so costly!" he supplemented, "but what colour and glaze! Just pass your hand over it, and feel the texture?"

At last the pair, having made a prolonged circuit of the two rooms, came to a golden Buddha, sitting with folded hands and wearing heavy rows of purple beads from throat to waist.

"What a delicious shade!" exclaimed Mimi, fingering the ornament as she spoke. "Glass, I suppose?"

"Glass!" snorted her companion. "Why, my good girl, these are real amethysts. I bought them from a man in Shang Tung, who was hard up—a bargain for three hundred pounds. They set off the Buddha, don't they?" staring as he spoke at the immovable image with its fixed, complacent smile.

As Mimi made no reply, he said:

"I know what you are thinking—how they would set off a tall, slim woman! Well, I daresay one day I'll bestow them on some deserving creature who has done her best to please me."

As they came to the door, before extinguishing the light, Dargan halted and said:

"Well, was your old lady's show anything like mine?"

"Oh, no, not to be named in the same year! Why, she hadn't a single good specimen of 'Sang de Bœuf,' her Blue Nankin over-glaze was very poor, and she had only one or two bits of Jesuit china, and 'Famille Vert.'"

"Then what were her strong points?"

"Monsters."

"Monsters!" he echoed in a loud voice.

"Yes, dragons, hylens, snakes, demons; you have nothing to correspond with her 'Dragon of the Earth,' or 'Dragon of Hidden Treasures.'"

"I see," he grunted, as he closed the door and slowly preceded her downstairs.

When at the foot he paused, turned to face her, and said with a grin :

" So I fall off in monsters, do I ? Well, let me tell you a little secret. Some people think I am a monster myself," and he gave a loud, harsh laugh, which rang through the vaulted hall.

" It was very kind of you to show me your collection," murmured the girl. " I adore china, and it has been a real treat, and a lesson too. Thank you so much—Mr. Dargan."

" Oh, well, you may call me Uncle Michael," he answered impulsively, then seized with a sudden panic, and fearing to commit himself further, he waved her in the direction of the morning-room, entered the library, and slammed the door.

Mimi did not meet her uncle before she started for the station. Strange to say, he had failed to appear at breakfast—the true reason being that he had taken himself severely to task in those silent hours when " conscience clamours." He felt that he had behaved foolishly with regard to the visitor, and had spoken unadvisedly with his tongue. If he did not go warily, he would soon find himself saddled with another girl—and of all girls—Vole's daughter ! Vole, whose very name was abhorred, and still stank in the nostrils of his surviving victims. No, he really could not trust himself to see the young woman again. However, he gave Henrietta an envelope containing a ten pound note, " to keep the poor relation going till she found a job," and as Henrietta had already bestowed five pounds from her private purse, the new niece did pretty well. A totally different individual was conducted to the hall door, from the miserable rain-soddened wayfarer who had arrived on Saturday night. Miss Vole looked delightfully fresh and smiling, her aunt had presented her with a pretty sable tie and a new veil—both of which became her to perfection.

Before she tripped down to the waiting taxi, her

warm-hearted relative embraced her and urged her to "be sure and write," and as the guest was borne away across the square, she leant forward in the open car and fluttered her pocket handkerchief till out of sight.

CHAPTER VII

CHANGE OF AIR

"So you've heard from that girl, Henrietta! Well, what does she say?" enquired Dargan a week later as he sat at breakfast. "Here, let me have a look at it," putting on his pince-nez, and extending a bony hand.

What the girl said was :

"Dear Aunt Henrietta,—I am settled here comfortably, thanks to the generosity of yourself and Uncle Michael. I have hired a machine, and get work that keeps me fairly busy, and brings in about a pound a week. Patty Stokes, our old housemaid, was pleased to welcome me, and makes me quite at home; I have a tiny bedroom and a cheerful little sitting-room on the ground floor, flagged; you can walk straight into it from the garden. For this accommodation, with light and attendance, I pay eight shillings a week—it may seem a ridiculously small rent, but Chesham is an out-of-the-way place, sunken in the country. When the days are longer I wish you and Jean would come down and spend an afternoon with me; we are only forty miles from Paddington. I will meet you at our little toy station, and give you a real village tea."

"Umph!" growled Mr. Dargan. "She doesn't invite me! and I don't see how she can feed herself and entertain guests on twelve shillings a week."

"We might take down a hamper," broke in Jean. "I think it would be splendid fun to picnic in the cottage; I would like to see Mimi again."

"Perhaps we will ask her up for a week-end," said her uncle, as he replaced the letter in the envelope with a

thoughtful face. "She writes a good hand, I see—clear as print."

"Yes," said Jean, "if she came to us for two or three days she could take the hamper back with her."

"What a capital idea," exclaimed Mrs. Toler. "Shall I write and fix a date? Say the Sunday after next, and later we will go down and picnic?"

"No, no," rejoined her brother, "wait a bit. I wonder she doesn't go in for something better worth while than typewriting."

"That will come by and by. I fancy the girl is glad to have the quiet of a village and a complete rest"

"Rest," he jeered. "Do you call typewriting a rest?"

"Well, at least she is her own mistress. I gather that Mrs. Yates held the reins pretty tight, and insisted on severe punctuality and conventionality. Mimi was obliged to dress in full state every night for dinner."

"Ah!" ejaculated Dargan. "So that is why she treated us to such an extra smart frock."

"Yes, I suppose so—she told me that she felt so utterly worn out after months of nursing, correspondence and reading aloud—for the old woman's relations gave her a very wide berth—that she felt on the verge of a nervous breakdown."

"Thank the Lord she didn't break down here!" said Dargan. "We might have had her on our hands for years!"

In less than a month Miss Vole reappeared in the Square, merely bringing a small suit-case. She looked extremely well—all the better for her rest in the country. To her Aunt Henrietta's outspoken joy, she admitted that she was a bridge player—and as it subsequently proved, an accomplished performer. Without loss of time, Mrs. Toler 'phoned and immediately collected two ladies to "make up a table," and they played with great zeal until the sound of the dressing bell.

One of these ladies happened to be Mrs. Brune, who was agreeably surprised to see the family skeleton, and

to find that she had secured a footing in the Square. After dinner Mr. Dargan entirely engrossed the visitor's society, discussing a recent great china sale, exhibited a new bowl, and introduced the girl to many outlying treasures in the library. Her manner was charming; that of a well instructed, but deferential connoisseur, who submissively appealed to him for guidance. It was a novel and delightful pleasure to Michael, to exhibit his treasures to one who hung on his words with breathless interest and to discuss his experiences and aims with an understanding sympathiser under his own roof. He was as keen to dwell on, and return to, the subject of "Blue China," as any young girl, who expatiates to another on her lover's perfections.

When Mimi left the Square on this occasion it was with a promise to return on a longer visit.

"You know you might help me with a catalogue," suggested her uncle in an off-hand way, "and take over some of the most particular dusting."

But to this remark the young lady made no reply beyond a faint and enigmatic smile.

Shortly after Miss Vole's departure, she was succeeded by another visitor to the Square, a detestable guest, named "flu," which seized on and laid low, Mrs. Toler and Jean. The master of the house rushed off to Brighton—he hated any form of sickness—and when they were convalescent, suggested that aunt and niece should join him by the sea. But Aunt Henny preferred to recuperate in the country; she disliked a grand hotel life and continual dressing, even with the chance of securing good Bridge. She felt unusually depressed and run down, and selected an old inn, well found, well situated, in a pretty country about ninety miles from London. Mrs. Toler was no stranger to the locality, she had visited the "Harlow Arms" on several occasions, as also had her brother for golf. The hotel was well away from the beaten track, and, as yet, old-fashioned and unspoiled.

The "Harlow Arms," a rambling red-brick house,

faced the entrance gates of Harlow Park, and as Mrs. Riggs, the proprietress, had once filled the post of family nurse, her guests were granted a free *entrée* to the estate and grounds—a concession which proved remarkably lucrative. Here, right across the road, lay a beautiful secluded enclosure, in which to range unhindered. Within a mile were reasonably good golf links; the situation was bracing, and the hotel, though Victorian, and still clinging to feather beds, and oil lamps, was scrupulously clean; the cooking appetising, and the fare to correspond. There was also a large garage, and a vast kitchen garden walled and full of fruit. As the result of these combined attractions, in summer time the "Arms" was full to the garrets, being the resort of golfers, artists, honeymooners, and people seeking fine country air and complete repose. Mrs. Riggs was a well-known character; bustling, energetic and capable, her daughter Bessie kept the books, her son, Sammy, drove the car. Her circumstances were flourishing, and she was excessively particular as to whom she accepted as guests; she had no accommodation for painted ladies, or fat fur-coated men—if *she* could keep them out.

At present, the hotel was undergoing a long-deferred spring cleaning; painters and white-washers had been in and left their traces, and when Mrs. Toler and her niece arrived, they were assured by Mrs. Riggs with uplifted hands that she was in such a desperate upset and muddle that she didn't know which way to turn. Carpets were up, curtains down, chimneys being swept; she was getting two bow windows and a service lift put into the coffee-room, and could only offer a small sitting-room looking out upon the road, "but there was a piano," she added "and I can give you two real nice bedrooms facing south."

"That will do perfectly, Mrs. Riggs," declared Mrs. Toler. "I am so thankful we shall have the place to ourselves, for I still feel dreadfully shaky."

The front sitting-room was cosy enough; it had two deep-set windows, a large fireplace, a hard old horse-hair

sofa, with a straight back, a cottage piano, and several basket chairs. There was also the usual allowance of early Victorian engravings, shell ornaments, and bazaar trash.

Mrs. Toler enjoyed the country, she was fond of a garden, and dogs (as long as they gave her no trouble) and country ways. In the Square she was somewhat out of her element, although she had done her utmost to adapt herself to town life as it held important compensations. She was the mistress of a fine, well-appointed residence and a staff of well trained but disagreeable servants. Her own income remained untouched save for clothes, bridge debts, and charities; moreover she found herself in a position to entertain her friends at capital little luncheons and bridge teas—these festivities generally taking place when Michael was absent for a day or two, but also when he was at home.

In return for all this she had merely to order meals, keep an eye on Jean, humour her brother, and obey Mrs. Webb. Nevertheless a breath of country air was a welcome change.

Soon after the arrival of her guests at "The Arms," Mrs. Riggs presented herself in the sitting-room with a view to a comfortable chat with her excellent customer, Mrs. Toler. After a few sympathetic questions regarding the ladies' health, she said:

"You will see some changes, ma'am; the big house is closed ever since the death of Mrs. Harlow."

"Oh, is she dead? I didn't know."

"Yes, she was took off quite sudden—an awful loss to the place and the poor—everyone loved her."

"What did she die of?"

"Some said heart—some said fretting after Mr. Vernon. He got into some trouble, and the Colonel, his father, who has an awful wild-beast sort of temper, drove him clean out of the country. And such a nice young fellow too, though I never nursed him—only Mr. George, the heir. Now the Colonel is in the London house, and I am

told, rather broken up. He bullied that poor dear lady, and now maybe he's sorry, for she was an angel—even to look at her did you good."

"Yes, I believe she was very charming, and I've heard that Colonel Harlow was a tyrant."

"That's true, but he's not a bad landlord, I'll allow. He owns 'The Arms,' of course, and has given me hot water and a new range."

And then Mrs. Riggs' talk rambled on to the wicked price of coal, and the airs of the parson's bride.

The next afternoon Mrs. Toler and Jean went for a turn in the park; it was early in May, the bluebells were carpeting the woods, the fresh green everywhere was a delightful rest to eyes accustomed to the bricks of London; primroses still lingered, and lambs gamboled and skipped—this was the time of their short lives.

Later on, as aunt and niece sat at table, a large grey motor, with a lady, gentleman and luggage glided noiselessly up to the hotel.

"I think they have only stopped for tea," said Mrs. Toler.

"No, Aunt Henny, it looks as if they had come to stay!"

"Which, thank goodness, is out of the question," said her aunt, as she helped herself to honey.

The door was slightly ajar, and voices in the hall were distinctly audible, Mrs. Riggs shrilly protesting; then a man's deep agreeable baritone steadily persuasive.

"Well, sir, you can see the way we're in, judge for yourself," she was saying. "Spring cleaning, with painters and carpenters and sweeps."

"Oh, we'll manage somehow; stick us in anywhere," urged a female treble.

"There's two ladies here—regular visitors, and they have the only sitting-room," announced Mrs. Riggs, precisely as if this statement clinched the whole business.

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed the man in an anguished tone.

"Yes, they have the front parlour—I could give you two real good bedrooms—but——"

A pause, and then evidently a conference.

"What are the ladies like?" inquired the treble voice.

"Oh, real nice, we know the family well. Mrs. Toler herself is an old lady (horrible shock to Mrs. Toler), and her niece, Miss Dargan, is a pretty young creature."

Another pause, and no doubt another conference.

Presently Mrs. Riggs entered briskly, and said:

"Would you mind sharing this, the general sitting-room, ma'am, with a lady and gentleman, a bride and bridegroom, I take it? They are a quiet-looking couple, and gentry, and tell me they will be out motoring most of the day. If you could see your way to oblige it would be a real favour to me;" then she added in a lower tone, "they can pay well."

The expression "old lady" still rankled in the bosom of Mrs. Toler, but Jean clapped her hands in ecstasy, and cried:

"Oh, Aunt Henny, do say yes! We'll never get such another chance. Fancy a real bride and bridegroom—what fun!"

"I am not at all sure about the fun," was the stiff rejoinder. "I shall be in my room for breakfast, and I dare say they won't be much indoors." Then turning to Mrs. Riggs, she added: "I don't like to stand in your way."

"Thank you, ma'am, that's very good of you, you know the winter is our slack time, and all this painting and improvements have run me into a lot of money."

So saying she withdrew, but only to usher in a tall, slim dark lady wearing a fur motor coat. There was nothing specially remarkable about her, except her eyes, which were truly magnificent: Eastern, expressive, and unforgettable.

"It is so kind of you to allow us to share," she began in a charming voice. The moment she spoke her face became full of life, sparkle and animation. "But Colonel Alsager

and I are bent on remaining here—even if we have to sit in the car in the garage; this is such a perfectly ideal country.”

Mrs. Toler bowed, and mumbled that “she was there for change of air, and more or less an invalid.”

“May I?” continued the stranger, beckoning to a tall, loose-limbed gentleman, with a large nose, “introduce Colonel Alsager?”

He had an aristocratic air, Alsager was a good old name, and to Mrs. Toler’s bow was added a smile.

“We won’t be in your way more than we can help,” he said in a deep agreeable voice. “We are early to bed, and early to rise sort of folk, and will efface ourselves—except at meal times.”

“No, no occasion,” protested Mrs. Toler, who realised that the strangers were a distinguished-looking couple, “I think a little society is good for everyone.”

“Well now, *ma mie*,” said Colonel Alsager, taking his wife’s arm, “we’d better go and inspect our quarters and order tea. Come along.”

“Gentlefolk!” said Mrs. Toler, as the door closed after them, “but what an extraordinary situation, and *what* a bore!”

“I believe we shall find them very amusing,” said Jean.

“Yes, that’s all you think of!”

“But Aunt Henny—how old for a bride and bridegroom—he has grey hair.”

“Oh, that’s not uncommon; I heard of an old man of eighty-four who was married last week. Possibly they have been married for years.”

“How old do you think the lady is?” inquired the girl.

“She’s not very ancient, and has the manners of one well accustomed to society—her furs are splendid! I don’t think she will ever see thirty again. For goodness sake don’t ask them questions or talk too much at meals, let them explain themselves, if they are so disposed.”

"Ah, I see, they are to do the telling, we, the listening!"

"Which won't be easy for you, Jean! What I mean is, that you are not to rush at them with your uncle's Blue China, and the house in the Square. Be polite, and if you *can*, be discreet. Now ring the bell and let Bessie take away the tea-things."

Presently Jean, who had stationed herself in the window, turned impulsively to her aunt, and said :

"Look! they are going across the road into the park, I think they must be bride and bridegroom—for they are walking hand in hand!"

CHAPTER VIII

COLONEL AND MRS. ALSAGER

COLONEL and Mrs. Alsager descended to dinner (soup, lamb, spinach, rhubarb-tart and cream); she appeared in a graceful tea-gown, and wore a string of matchless pearls, he, the usual "magpie" garb. They were apologetic (being somewhat late), disposed to be agreeable, and inclined to be amused at small deficiencies: criticised the bread and soup, drank champagne, handed by their chauffeur—a clean-shaven, gentlemanly individual who helped to wait—and seemed to be in some vague way on a different plane of society to that of the "Square." The strangers discussed plays, concerts, the condition of the roads, and inquired about the neighbouring golf links, and the nearest market town.

"You see, we have never been here before," explained the man, "but a friend of mine, who was married last year, recommended the place as a top-hole find for scenery, good air, retirement, and cooking."

"So it is," corroborated Mrs. Toler. "My brother and I have stayed here several times, and have always found ourselves most comfortable."

When the dinner had been cleared away, Colonel Alsager opened the piano, and ran over the keys with a large and practised hand.

"Do you play?" he asked, turning to Jean.

As she seemed to hesitate, he said: "Are you meditating the usual reply 'a little'?"

"No, no," interposed Mrs. Toler, "Jean plays a great deal; in fact, in her uncle's opinion, a great deal *too much*."

She is a pupil of the Royal Academy of Music, and practises three or four hours a day. However, the piano is in an empty room at the top of the house, and so my brother is not disturbed."

"I suppose he does not care for music," said Mrs. Alsager, in her soft, drawling voice, "and looks upon it as someone declared, as nothing more or less than 'an expensive noise.' But I dare say," glancing at Jean with her dark, expressive eyes, "you are fond of it?"

"Oh, yes," she assented with a blush. "I love music."

"The people at the college say that this child has extraordinary talent, and want her to take up music seriously, and become a professional pianist; but, of course, such an idea is preposterous. When I showed the letter to my brother he nearly had a fit, and threatened to put an end to her lessons."

"I see that Miss Dargan will have a good deal in common with us," said Colonel Alsager, "for we are tremendously musical, and she," nodding at his wife, "has a fine contralto, and accompanies herself on the guitar; but we won't inflict you."

"Oh, please, please, don't put it like that," protested Mrs. Toler. "I do hope you will play and sing to us, I feel sure it would be a delightful treat."

"Well, perhaps on another occasion," said Colonel Alsager, rising. "Just now we will leave you to yourselves for we," with a gay nod, and a gay laugh, "are going away to smoke!"

The Alsagers did not reappear that evening, but in what seemed to Jean to be the dead of the night, she was awoken by the far-away sound of a song, and the strumming of a light guitar! The new-comers proved to be as good as their word with regard to absence from the sitting-room; they breakfasted early, took their lunch with them, and went out in the car, returning in time for dinner; they strolled in the park, played golf in the afternoon,

and had tea at the golf-house. Undoubtedly they were a distinguished couple, he, a tall soldierly individual of forty-five, with clean-cut features, hair slightly touched with grey, and rather sad blue eyes, set in a sunburnt face. His golfing kit was severely correct, and he wore knickerbockers, and stocking with the most wonderful "tops."

Mrs. Alsager, tall, dark and handsome, possessed a glamorous personality, and was one you could not forget. She looked "a somebody," with the face of an aristocrat, and the poise and voice of a finished woman of the world.

Occasionally after dinner the couple would linger in the parlour, open the piano, and make some charming music. He was a real artist, his interpretation of a symphony by Tschaikowsky, even on that worn instrument, was something to hear and remember—and she sang in a delicious contralto, operatic songs, French or German ballads, and occasionally accompanied herself on the guitar. Jean, who although nervous when called upon to perform, played with surprising success Chopin and Grieg. It seemed marvellous, that this slim little girl held such a command of the instrument—at the piano she presented a changed personality. Sometimes her music was stirring, sometimes dreamy and emotional. Sometimes according to Colonel Alsager, her music melted the heart, and made him think of a sun-lit garden!

Aunt Henny approved of the strangers, especially of Colonel Alsager—she usually preferred men to women, and, it was whispered, had been a notorious flirt before the Reverend Augustus Toler had led her to the altar—they had various tastes in common, for instance, Bridge, and he was by no means indifferent to the fascinations of jig-saw, whilst Mrs. Alsager looked and jeered. "Child's play," she exclaimed, "why not a Noah's ark or a box of bricks at once?" But Colonel Alsager had been bitten by the craze, and was nearly as keen as Mrs. Toler. During meals they discussed the weather, the food, the

peculiarities of Mrs. Riggs—Mrs. Alsager was an inimitable mimic—novels, plays, music, golf, spiced with little local scandal; but they never touched on personalities, and remained entirely ignorant of one another's domestic affairs. In the visitor's book was inscribed, "Mrs. Toler, and Miss Jean Dargan, 202, Bedford Square, London." Directly under this came "Colonel and Mrs. Alsager, Hesperia Castle, Isle of Skye." The newcomers proved adaptable and friendly, so all things considered, this unusual party amalgamated remarkably well. Jean Dargan, a clever, intelligent girl, picked up many novel ideas; she learnt new expressions, heard manners and customs she had been accustomed to revere, ridiculed and laughed at as old-fashioned; and whilst the Colonel and Aunt Henny puzzled over jig-saw and Bridge problems, she and Mrs. Alsager talked and walked arm in arm in the garden, and she received various new and illuminating impressions. Mrs. Alsager, not content with putting ideas into this young girl's head, gave her lessons in a way of doing her hair, and adjusting her blouses; she also presented her with a huge flacon of delicious scent, and a copy of Béranger's poems. The conversation of these strangers was usually lively, was not confined to Blue China and Bridge, but roamed over the Continent with an air of easy acquaintance, and an occasional dash of French. Sometimes the topics were what Mrs. Toler considered a little *risqué*. Once, when discussing a recent divorce case, Colonel Alsager said:

"Who would have thought that the fellow would come back from South America—or was it South Africa?—after being away for twelve years."

To which Mrs. Alsager responded: "*Il n'y a que les morts qui ne reviennent pas.*"

"Oh, yes, I know," assented her husband, "but everyone hoped he had snuffed out! Death affords a happy asylum for unpleasant people."

Mrs. Toler was not at all sure that she approved of such conversation before Jean; had she been alone she would

have enjoyed it thoroughly, and possibly, like Oliver, "asked for more." Colonel Alsager was an amusing cynic, and, in a pleasant and good-natured way, expressed a general suspicion of everyone, and everything. Hearing his wife describe a neighbour as a second Penelope, he exclaimed :

"To be quite candid, I have never believed in that model of domestic virtue. Query—did she really unravel at night what she spun during the day ? "

"Why, of course she did," declared Mrs. Alsager.

"Or," pausing with an expressive gesture, "did she tell this tale to the old man ? Most likely she spent her time spinning intrigues with her suitors."

"Oh, Charlie, what a shameless iconoclast," protested his wife. "Mrs. Toler is scandalised, and Jean's faith in history and heroines will be seriously undermined."

Beguiled by the fine weather, Mrs. Toler took a walk in the park in thin shoes, and although the grass looked like green velvet it was damp. The result was a serious relapse, bronchitis set in, and the chaperon was confined to her room—leaving Jean and the happy pair *tête-à-tête*.

Relieved of Mrs. Toler's presence—which, to tell the truth, had more than a suspicion of the wet blanket, Jean became intimate with the strangers, absorbed impressions, and fresh views of life. The Alsagers now remained longer in the sitting-room, smoked and sang, and when they persuaded Jean to play to them, proved a delightfully sympathetic, and stimulating audience.

"What are your other tastes, dear child ? " enquired Mrs. Alsager one evening. "What do you really like and enjoy besides music ? "

"Country life. I love gardening, and dogs, and birds ; I can speak French fluently, for I had a French nurse."

"You sing too ! I heard you, and your voice is very fresh and sweet, but has too small a compass for a large audience ; however, delightful *pour passer le temps* ! "

"But I don't want the time to pass," protested Jean.
"I am so happy!"

"Happy!" echoed the lady. "How truly amazing to see someone who is happy—not a happy 'has been,' or a happy 'to be,' but happy this very moment. Oh, you *lucky* girl! I must take your photo!"

In sober earnest, Mrs. Alsager could not understand Jean Dargan's attitude, and her beaming little face, with its halo of reddish hair; the girl had no companions of her own age—no one, but a rather fussy, elderly woman; she had nothing to do all the day long, but wander about the park, play with the hotel dogs, and help her relative with jig-saw puzzles. The couple liked the "flapper," as they called her, and occasionally invited her to accompany them for a stroll after dinner.

It was a lovely moonlight night, and Colonel and Mrs. Alsager, who had definitely abandoned the piano for the park, said, as they entered the gates:

"There's that poor kid all by herself, stuffing indoors. You run back, Charlie, and bring her along!"

The Harlow family were from home, the "Place" was shuttered and closed, and they, the sheep, and the birds had the park to themselves. As they wandered along Mrs. Alsager would occasionally sing a verse from some ballad, or he would spout lines from Kipling, Shakespeare, or the Bab Ballads; he had a delightful voice, and his elocution was perfection. They talked but little—there were long pauses during which they appeared to drink in, and enjoy their surroundings. The sleeping park, the dark trees outlined in the moonlight, the faint twittering of sleepy birds; at last they came to a rustic bench, overlooking the river. Here the Alsagers seated themselves, whilst Jean took up an independent position upon the stump of a tree.

"Stay," exclaimed Mrs. Alsager, "don't I hear a cuckoo!"

"Surely not at this time of night," protested her husband. "They generally begin about dawn."

"The moonlight is so bright—there's no doubt he has mistaken the time—or his cuckoo clock is broken."

"The cuckoo is a hateful bird," put in Jean. "I can't think what's the good of him!"

"Well, he and his family bring into play the devotion and unselfishness of foster parents. I suppose cuckoos have unusual powers of attraction, and self-help, of no common order; the soft, blind nestling turns its foster-brothers out of their nests by writhing beneath them, lifting them over the edge with its hollow back; its greed is insatiable—the old birds work hard to appease its appetite, and will go on feeding it long after it can fly!"

"My dear Charlie, how *do* you know all this?" enquired Mrs. Alsager.

"Oh, as a boy I made a study of ornithology, and I still have a weakness in that direction. The best place for finding cuckoos' eggs is in the tit-lark's nest."

"I know one or two human cuckoos—the most poisonous and pestilential specimens of our race; you discover them in wealthy families."

"Oh, I don't think I have come across them—*yet*."

"So much the better for you, dear man; they work their ways into homes by the most artful and insidious means, and by and by, dominate the household, hold the purse and oust various inmates—much in the style of the able-bodied young cuckoo."

"Oh, such creatures should be insured against or shot! By the way, what are those lines of Wordsworth?"

"'Oh, Cuckoo, shall I call thee bird—
Or but a wandering voice!'"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mrs. Alsager. "Our own particular wandering cuckoo has found out its mistake, and returned to bed. Oh, Charlie, what a glorious, glorious night! This is exactly the time and the hour for one of your recitations—the hour and the man. I know Miss Dargan will back me up, won't you?"

"Oh, do, do!" urged Jean. "Something funny, please!"

"Well, no, strange to say, I don't feel particularly funny to-night. But I'll try something old—something that was written by a fellow who made love to Anne Boleyn, and although the affair was absolutely innocent, it cost the poor chap his head!"

"I suppose you mean Sir Thomas Wyatt?" said Jean timidly.

Colonel Alsager nodded, and after an unusually long pause, during which he sat motionless, gazing intently at the river, he began in a low, intense voice:

"Forget not yet the tried intent
Of such a truth as I have meant;
My great travail so gladly spent,
Forget not yet.

"Forget not yet, when first began
The weary life ye know, since when
The suit, the service none can tell;
Forget not yet!

"Forget not yet the great assays,
The cruel wrong, the scornful ways,
The painful patience in delays
Forget not yet!

"Forget not! O, forget not this,
How long has been, and is,
The mind that never meant amiss—
Forget not this!

"Forget not, then, thine own approved
The which so long, hath thee so loved,
Whose steadfast faith yet never moved—
Forget not this!"

When he came to the end of these beautiful lines, Mrs. Alsager suddenly extended one hand, took her husband's in hers, and they sat in expressive silence.

For the first and only time since Jean had been with them she felt painfully *de trop*. Apparently they had entirely forgotten her, so she rose quietly, and slipped away unnoticed.

After she had gone some distance, she halted, and looked back; the pair were silhouetted in the bright moonlight, he had his arm round her waist, while her head rested upon his shoulder.

"So they were a bride and bridegroom after all!" said Jean to herself as she left the park almost on tiptoe.

The next morning Mrs. Alsager invited "the flapper" to accompany them for a long motor ride.

"You have seen nothing of the country, my little chick; ask your aunt if she will allow you to come for a spin? We'll have tea at some inn. You would like a jaunt, wouldn't you?"

"I should love it; I'll run and ask Aunt Henny."

"You won't mind sitting in front with the chauffeur, will you?"

"Mind! I should prefer it!" was her answer, and she fled upstairs.

Jean found Aunt Henny seated near the window—not an inch of which was open—tended by her maid, Miller, from the Square, a withered and useless person,—and in a somewhat querulous frame of mind. When asked for her consent to the motor ride, she said:

"Oh, well, we know nothing whatever about them though I must say, they look all right—and Alsager is a good name! There's no Burke or Red Book in the hotel, of course! I'm not sure that your uncle would care for you to go scooting round the country with strangers—but after all, since I've been shut up here you have had a pretty dull time—so you can go if you like."

And naturally Jean did like! Kind Mrs. Alsager lent her a splendid motor coat, and a delicately-scented veil, and they had a delightful run of many miles. Jean sat in front with the chauffeur as they buzzed along at the rate of twenty miles an hour, through a lovely green country, by empty roads, and lanes, through picturesque hamlets and ugly little towns. At last they halted for tea at a well known motoring hotel. Several other cars were drawn up around the porch, and undoubtedly this

"Grey Man" was a favourite rendezvous. In a large lounge they found a number of people in small parties drinking tea, or stronger refreshment, and making a great deal of noise.

Among these other guests, Jean particularly noticed one, a puffy-looking individual, with a black moustache and prominent black eyes, who stared at them continually; evidently Mrs. Alsager realised and resented such notice, for she whispered to her husband and their departure was somewhat abrupt, and it struck Jean—who was naturally observant—that as Colonel Alsager settled his wife in the car, he looked strangely grave, and put out.

The following morning when the "flapper" descended to breakfast she was amazed to hear that "the Alsagers had gone." What an early start, and not a word to her! She felt a little hurt, and also sincerely sorry; how she would miss the gay talk, the strolls, the music, the loan of books---and the generous supply of chocolates.

When Mrs. Riggs' daughter Bessie came in to lay the cloth for lunch, she said:

"Well, Miss, I see you look a bit lonely, but I'm real glad that couple is gone although he paid like a prince. I think there was something mighty queer about *her*," and she gave the little sniff, so well and often mimicked by Mrs. Alsager.

"How do you mean?" inquired Jean.

"Well, she had no trousseau, no, not so much as a pair of shoes. Her clothes were fine, and of the best, but there was nothing *new*; that chauffeur-valet kept a close mouth, but I think he could tell a tale if he liked, and she never got no letters—no more did he—only telegrams. Now I'd like to know the reason of *that*?" and she tossed her head, and sniffed.

"Mrs. Alsager was very kind to me," said Jean, "and I liked her immensely! Perhaps you are prejudiced."

"No, I liked her too!" admitted Miss Riggs. "She was uncommonly gay and clever—quite the lady in her

way—but for all that, I don't believe she was what she seemed—like as not, a *divorcée* !”

“ Oh, Miss Riggs ! How can you ? What would my aunt say if she heard you ? ” inquired Jean with a scarlet face.

“ Don't know, I'm sure ! I shall keep my opinion from my mother, but I had to speak to some one, or I believe I'd have had an illness. You won't let it go any further, will you, miss ? ”

“ No, I promise you, for if I did, *you* might fare worse ! For my own part, I think Mrs. Alsager is charming, and if Aunt Henny had been able to get downstairs I'd have begged her to invite them to the Square.”

CHAPTER IX

A PICNIC FOR TWO

AFTER the departure of the Alsagers, life fell rather flat at the "Harlow Arms," for paradoxical as it sounds, although these guests were absent most of the day, they seemed to have imported a certain amount of liveliness into the sleepy old inn. Mrs. Toler was not only astonished but puzzled and annoyed, to hear of their unexpected exodus, but when she cross-examined Mrs. Riggs, all Mrs. Riggs could find to say was, "Well, ma'am, they came sudden and they went sudden. In these days people is terribly like that—sort of restless! Long ago I've had folks that would take their rooms months ahead, and maybe stop the whole summer, and now visitors just motor up to the door and walk in and walk out, and that's the middle and two ends of it."

Mrs. Toler was still keeping her room and subsisting on slops, novels, and sympathetic correspondence. Jean found the atmosphere of the apartment oppressive and almost stifling; it was a particularly warm day, but the windows were hermetically sealed, flies buzzed impatiently on the panes and the air was laden with the fumes of paregoric and eucalyptus. It was one of Mrs. Toler's peculiarities, that when she suffered from any ailment, she made the very most of it and was inclined to prolong the period of convalescence. Once Dargan in a moment of exasperation had announced that "he really could not keep pace with Aunt Henny's colds." Fortunately the present cold was now on the wane, another day or two would see the invalid downstairs.

"My dear child," she said, looking hard at Jean, "you are pale, you should be out in the air. It is such a pity to be indoors when you are well and strong. What do you mean to do to-day?"

"I think I'll go over into the park with a book, and some sewing."

"Happy thought! Why not have a nice little picnic all by yourself, and take a couple of the dogs? Ask Mrs. Riggs to put you up a basket and enjoy some cool, leafy retreat. Here, I'll lend you a book," and she turned over a pile beside her. "'The Man's Other Wife,' no, no, *that* wouldn't do! 'Two in Paris.' Tut! Tut! Ah, here's one of these shilling editions—and quite innoxious 'The Wreck of the *Grosvenor*'—yes, that will be all right! Has the second post come in yet?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I'm rather surprised, I have not heard from your Uncle Michael for more than a week."

"Oh, you know how he hates writing—if you can call that awful Chinese scrawl, writing."

"That's true," agreed Mrs. Toler. "Well, now my dear, see that Mrs. Riggs puts you up a substantial lunch and run along and enjoy yourself, I shall not expect to see you till tea time."

Mrs. Riggs liked little Miss Jean and supplied a lunch as if she loved her; cold chicken, home-made bread and butter, jam tarts, the best part of a seed cake, and a bottle of milk.

"Shall I get a boy to carry it for you, miss?" she inquired.

"No, no, Mrs. Riggs, I'm not so decrepit as all that," she answered with a laugh. "And what about the dogs—Bill and Joe?"

"The two young ones have gone ratting with Sam! my word these rats be a plague! But old Bob, who is fat and lazy will be very glad to go with you," and she whistled for a stout fox-terrier who presently came

bursting into the hall with all the violent alacrity of youth!

Jean and Bob made their way slowly across the park, keeping well in the shade; they were bound for a particular dell deep in the woods, which would be, in Jean's opinion, the perfection of coolness and quiet on such a broiling day. The demesne was of wide extent, and the girl paused, and rested several times, before she arrived at the desired goal—a delightful little mossy glade, almost surrounded by trees and underwood. As she wandered along between the whispering green leaves she sang in short snatches, and her sweet, bird-like notes seemed particularly appropriate to this woodland scene.

It was half-past twelve when Bob and Jean arrived at their destination; here she sat down upon a convenient log, removed her hat, and proceeded to examine the contents of the basket—in which examination Bob displayed a keen personal interest.

"Why, we have enough for three!" she exclaimed, addressing him. "I declare, there's half a chicken, you shall have the bones, Bob, and if you are very good, perhaps I will give you some milk; it's too early for lunch yet, so you may just as well lie down and go to sleep, you greedy, old fat thing," for Bob, who was notoriously fond of food, was already sitting up on his hind legs, begging and displaying an *embonpoint* that would not have discredited an alderman!

Jean settled down with the shilling volume, "The Wreck of the *Grosvenor*," and soon found herself, so to speak, on the high seas and completely detached from her surroundings. She made a charming picture as she sat bareheaded on the low log, the shadows of the leaves casting flickering patterns on her sunny hair, with Bob asleep on the skirt of her blue cotton frock. An hour had passed, when Jean's attention was suddenly diverted from the wind and waves; what was this strange, cautious crackling of branches in the undergrowth immediately behind her? The sound was coming nearer

and nearer. What could it be? A sheep? Some *big* animal undoubtedly. She turned her head, and was considerably startled to behold the figure of a man thrusting his way through the bushes. She sprang to her feet, and as she did so, he emerged, revealing himself as a young, smooth-faced individual in a blue serge suit, who looked convincingly sane, and harmless; as Jean retreated a few steps, and Bob erected his bristles and growled savagely, he said in a vibrant, well-bred voice:

"I'm most awfully sorry if I have given you a fright!"

"I wasn't frightened," she protested, facing him, "but your manner of getting about is rather mysterious and unusual," and she surveyed him with clear eyes full of youth and merriment.

"That's so," he assented. "I've forgotten the lie of this plantation, and lost my way in the bushes, besides I didn't want anyone to see me."

As he spoke he threw himself on the grass and removed his hat; and she noticed that his left hand was roughly tied up in his handkerchief.

Jean was at a loss what to say or do, and, amazing fact, Bob was circling round the stranger, with screams and yelps of ecstatic rapture.

"Well, 'Uncle Bob,' so you have not forgotten me?" said the stranger as he returned Bob's greeting. "Fancy that, after two years! Hold on, hold on, I'm not a plate!" Then turning to Jean, "I must tell you, my dear young lady, that I am absolutely starving. I saw your inviting spread, I heard you talking to 'Uncle,' telling him that there was enough for *three*, and I could not resist the call of the food, as I've not had a morsel to eat since one o'clock yesterday, so I hope you will kindly forgive this unmannerly intrusion—and spare me a few scraps!"

"Oh, certainly, as many as you please," said Jean, now sitting down upon the log and preparing to divide

the fowl. Here undoubtedly was a modern girl, who accepted the unusual with easy nonchalance.

"I'm afraid there's only one plate!"

"Oh, don't bother about a plate!" receiving, as he spoke, the wing of the chicken, on a large slice of bread, which he attacked at once.

Yes, the mysterious unknown had spoken the truth—he *was* ravenously hungry.

Then as Jean poured out a tumbler of milk, and put it down beside him, she remarked to herself:

"Here is my first *real* adventure. What would Uncle Michael and Aunt Henny say, if they could see me entertaining a man who is probably a thief, and in hiding from the police!"

She glanced swiftly at him; he had a thin, bronzed face, quick, dark eyes—and looked like a gentleman. When presenting a well-picked bone to Bob, she said, as she replenished his bread plate:

"I see that the dog knows you, but you call him 'Uncle?'"

"Oh, yes, it's a case of Argus and Ulysses. Once upon a time 'Uncle' belonged to me. I see they have changed his name to Bob, no doubt they think 'Uncle' sounds too *intimate*," then stroking the dog's head, he added: "'Uncle,' old boy, you've lost your figure—no rabbit holes for you now—you were always a greedy pig, you know, but a rare good sort with a heart as big as your appetite!"

"I suppose you gave him to Mrs. Riggs?" said Jean.

"Well, er, not exactly, but I am glad to see that 'Uncle' has found a comfortable situation, with a good cuisine. I conclude you are staying at the 'Harlow Arms,' as I find you in his company?"

"Yes, we have been there about three weeks," bestowing on her guest, as she spoke, a couple of jam tarts, which he subsequently demolished in greedy silence. They were followed by a generous helping of seed cake.

"I say," he began presently, "it's ruffianly of me to come and wolf your lunch like this."

"Oh, I've more than enough," she protested, "and I wasn't hungry—it's really too *hot* to eat."

"You have seen that the heat didn't interfere with my appetite, didn't you? Shall we present the bones to 'Uncle,' and will you permit me to pack the basket?"

"No, thank you, I can manage all right." Then looking round the glade, she added, "I must be going."

"Oh, please don't move yet," he protested. "Why, it's not more than two o'clock, you'll find it frightfully hot walking across the park—you will get sunstroke."

To this suggestion Jean made no reply but busied herself with the knives and forks, and bestowed a large piece of cake on "Uncle."

"Don't go away just yet," urged the stranger. "Wait for a little time, and allow me to tell you why I've been marauding about the place, and creeping through the undergrowth. Some explanation is due to you."

As he spoke he sprang to his feet; he was much taller than Jean had first supposed, and seemed to tower over her.

"I cannot really let you hurry off like this, do please give me a few minutes?" he urged, with an outstretched arm.

"I see you've hurt your hand," she remarked.

"That's so, getting over the wall last night. Broken bottles are the mischief. Come now, there are one or two things I want to tell you. Please don't be so stiff-necked and conventional, but allow me to have my little talk out, and give me a chance of preventing you from running away with a wrong impression."

This tall young man had an authoritative manner, and an agreeable voice. Colouring with surprise, spurred

by an ever active curiosity, and commanded by an unaccountable interest, Jean seated herself without a word—by no means reluctant to lend an ear to whatever her companion wished to explain—and thus the adventure continued to develop.

CHAPTER X

WHY THE DOG WAS CARRIED

"I SAY, do you mind if I smoke?" he asked, producing a gold cigarette case.

Jean murmured a prompt consent, and furtively watched this surprising stranger as he extracted a "John Cotton," and struck a match. His figure was well-knit, his dark hair closely cut, and his nose aristocratic, but his face looked worn and haggard—suggesting some recent illness or grief—and his blue serge was most shockingly creased. No doubt he had slept in it! A half dead rose dangled from his button-hole, and his otherwise irreproachable boots were coated with mud.

As sagacious little Jean contemplated these details, she encountered point blank the steady glance of her companion.

"Can't make it out, can you?" he began, with unexpected directness, as he jerked the match into some bushes. "I don't know who you are—you don't know who I am!—though I dare say you suppose quite naturally that I've escaped from some asylum or jail?"

"Oh, no, no," she protested, with eager emphasis.

"But why not? My appearance and movements are well open to suspicion. Now let me clear myself, and in return for your courage in not screaming and bolting—but, on the contrary, sharing your excellent lunch—I would like to explain *who* I am. My name is Vernon Harlow."

"Harlow!" repeated Jean under her breath, and she

followed him with wondering blue eyes as he paced to and fro with "Uncle" at his heels.

"Yes, I was born in the Place down there. I belong here—*did* belong, I should say, for in our family I am the odd one out," and he took a long draw at his cigarette.

"Oh!" ejaculated Jean, who was considerably startled by this piece of information.

"Yes, I was always a troublesome, mischievous little devil, running wild with grooms and gamekeepers, experimenting on explosives and young horses, and with a craze for seeing how things were put together, and made! The clocks suffered sorely from *me*! My brother George, ten years older than I am, was always a pattern—steady as old Time."

He paused, took another turn, and then went on:

"My father is a survival of what is called 'the old school'—though he never went to school—a good, just man according to his lights, with a horrible family temper. He and I rarely saw things eye to eye. I was, as they say in the States, 'number twenty-three,' and I take after my mother's people, who are hot-blooded, go-ahead, non-stop folk. I wanted to go to Winchester—my father sent me to Eton. I was mad for Woolwich—but he booked me for the Guards. I put in three years with them, and had a topping time, and met a lot of old pals; then my father and I had a holy row about money—and another matter; it was a pretty awful business! He stopped my allowance, and put an end to what is called my 'career.' They say 'who rocks the cradle rules the world,' but don't you believe it. 'Who holds the *purse* rules the world.' My pater is a rich man, generous in some ways, narrow, and close-fisted in others. A tyrant to all of us, and to himself. My sentence was not to set foot in England for three years. I was literally stampeded out of the country! So there was nothing for me to do, but to make a fresh start elsewhere—America for choice. My mother was heart-broken, but through some good friends she managed to find me an opening in an

aircraft factory in the States. My job is at Mineola, Long Island, and suits me down to the ground. The Mum and I had a few days here before I sailed." He halted for a moment and stood with his back to Jean—what a flat, well-drilled back!—the back of a Guardsman. Then turning suddenly about he threw himself down on the grass and began picking blades with an air of absorbed abstraction. At last he said:

"I've put in nearly two years in the States and have done surprisingly well, but mechanics and mathematics were always in my line. I had a really good time until a month ago, when—when——" and his voice shook, "I got a cable."

"Yes, I understand," murmured Jean.

"Her death was most awfully sudden—I was just knocked out, and absolutely useless for anything—I felt so utterly stunned, and dazed. So, though it was our busy season, my boss said: 'Take a run home and come back in the next boat. The sea will brace you up and do you good,' and here I am! I landed from New York the day before yesterday, and sail again to-morrow afternoon."

"But do you mean to say that you are not going to let your friends know that you are over?"

"No, I took the trip with but one object—to see the old place and the grave. I shall return without having talked to a soul but yourself. My father and I do not correspond—*she* never missed a mail. Oh, how I should hate him to hear that I had been prowling round—although I never gave my parole. The Place is closed; I expected to find the old housekeeper, Sally Parr, who'd have taken me in and held her tongue, but she happens to be away on her holiday. I wandered about the woods yesterday, and the gardens after dusk. I slept in a dilapidated old summer-house along with thousands of earwigs. Of course I never dreamt of bringing any food with me, for I reckoned on old Sally. One thing I *have* accomplished, I have started a ghost! Maxwell,

the head gardener, who met me last evening in the long walk, face to face, dropped a basket of tomatoes and ran for his life. Well, now, I believe I've told you all there is to tell—a fine long yarn too, and for your ear alone."

"Thank you—you may be sure I shall keep your secret," said Jean, for this strange young man had an air of convincing sincerity. "Now, the next thing to be done, is to find some water and allow me to bathe your hand."

"That will be awfully kind of you. The nearest water is a little stream about a quarter of a mile away."

"Come on then!" said Jean with schoolgirl abruptness.

As Harlow led the way, carrying the basket, and closely attended by "Uncle," he said:

"I know every blessed stick and stone and tree and rabbit-hole. I'd tell in a moment if there were the smallest change. I even adore the funny old pictures indoors, and the stiff, uncomfortable furniture. I often dream of the place and imagine I'm here! It seems like a dream *now*—walking down to the silver spring, with a strange girl!"

"I wish your wound may prove a dream!" said Jean drily.

"No fear! It's smarting for all it's worth! I wonder if I have a streak of cat in my composition?"

"Not likely. Why? Such a funny idea!"

"Because I'm attached to places, same as the great Puss tribe. I really love Harlow, and by the irony of fate, it will belong to my brother who hates it, and swears he will never live here. Give him Piccadilly, and the rush of London"

"Perhaps he may hand it over to you some day!"

"The house and park—minus the rents! It costs a good lot to keep up. Still I might contrive, or manage the estate for George. It's a big rambling old house for one man—I should have to marry!" and he laughed.

"But why not?"

"Oh, various reasons. I'm too young for one thing."

"How old are you?" inquired Jean, the questioner.

"Twenty-five this month—and you?"

"Just eighteen."

"You don't say! I'd have taken you for sixteen, you look such a kid!" Then pausing for a moment. "Do you see that copper beech below? Well, once upon a time I did my very best to cut it down with mother's fretwork saw, simply because I disliked the *colour*. Now I think it glorious! Close by, but not in view, is another landmark, a tall fir. I ran away from my governess, as I knew she was going to take me to the dentist, and swarmed up to near the top. Jeering and playing the fool I fell fifty feet, and broke my arm. Of course, it *ought* to have been my neck. Well, here we are!" he announced as they came to the edge of a clear stream trickling mysteriously through rocks and ferns.

Jean untied the handkerchief and examined the injured member. In spite of her youth she was a girl with steady nerves, and did not blench when she discovered a nasty ragged cut in the wrist, and another in the palm of the hand. After she had probed and bathed the wounds, she said:

"This ought to be dressed by a doctor or a chemist, otherwise I'm afraid you will have a very troublesome hand."

"I can't do anything about doctor or chemist until this evening. After dusk I will walk into Minchester, and get a bed."

"And that won't be for hours. If you will wait here I will run back to the inn and bring boracic and lint. I've learnt first aid, and I know you ought not to trifle with such a hand. I won't be long."

"This is most awfully good of you. I'll show you a short cut."

Skirting through the woods by a path, they presently arrived within a few yards of the great gates, and Jean took the empty basket, whilst "Uncle" remained with

his old master. She hurried stealthily to her room—afraid of encountering some questioner—snatched up remedies and a clean handkerchief, and after glancing at herself in the glass, flew downstairs, and rejoined her late companion.

Standing with his back against a tree, Harlow held out his wrist with a smile, and said :

“ I suppose this is a teeth-clenching business, eh ? ”

Jean shook her head and immediately set to work in a business-like style, dressing and bandaging the hand with dexterous and dainty fingers.

“ Now,” she said, “ I think that will be all right until this evening—it is the best I can do for you.”

“ You can do something better than that for me,” was the unexpected rejoinder. “ You can tell me your name ? ”

“ What is the good of telling you my name ? You are going to New York to-morrow, and we shall never meet again.”

“ Why do you say that ! I shall come back. After all, this is my native country, and I love every inch of Harlow. I hope to make a success of my job, and that the ‘ Welland-Harlow plane ’ may be heard of one day. I am devoted to the Wellands, but I don’t propose to spend my life in America. Come now, you have told me your age and you may as well tell me your name—or I shall have to invent one.”

“ What would you call me ? ”

“ The Fair One with the Golden Hair.”

“ The Fair One with Carroty Hair, you mean,” she corrected. “ My full name is Jean Cameron Dargan.”

“ Dargan ! ” he repeated. “ By Jove ! I remember a gruff old fellow of that name—which is rather uncommon—coming up to look at the blue china in our china closet. Mother took him round. He did not think much of our collection, I could see, with the exception of one blue jar, which, according to him, was priceless, if it had not been all rivets ! I had had an accident with it

in my youthful days, and thereby had done the family out of, what he said, represented a thousand pounds. I believe mother kept this fact dark."

"The old gentleman' considers himself in the prime of life. He is my Uncle Michael, and I live with him—have lived with him for years. My parents died in Shanghai."

"He is a well known collector, I believe?"

"He is indeed, his heart and soul are devoted to porcelain."

"A harmless foible—but I should have thought his heart and soul were devoted to *you*."

"Oh, no, he just tolerates me and calls me a 'flapper!' I dust the china, run messages, and write notes—so I'm useful."

"And ornamental," suggested the young man.

"No, no," she protested brusquely. "I don't want any of your American compliments! I know I'm not the least ornamental; but if I have been a little of *use*, I am glad. And now—long threatening comes at last—I must be off."

"Oh, must you? Hold on a bit—I have not asked for the Riggs family—how are they?"

"Well, and flourishing."

"Mrs. Riggs was George's nurse: she married after she had reared him. I was a sort of postscript, so she did not have much to say to me. I remember Bessie; she had fat curls and shiny cheeks, and when I was about five I loved her madly—indeed, I believe I proposed that we should run away together, and live on sponge cakes in these woods!"

"I'm afraid you must have been a tiresome, precocious monkey!"

"That's right—I was—though my mother thought me a little unfledged angel."

"Now I really *am* going," announced Jean, with an air of stern resolution.

"Well, little Miss Jean, you have brightened up this

glimpse of my dear, empty home. It has done me no end of good to talk to you—some day, I shall write.”

“But you don’t know my address.”

“The niece of a celebrity is easily spotted.”

“No, please don’t write.”

“Why not? Who would object? Your uncle? Or perhaps there is somebody who would be jealous—and slay me?”

“No, no,” she answered with emphasis and a heightened colour. “What a funny idea—I am not even out yet!”

“At anyrate you have been ‘out’ to-day—a most happy circumstance for me! This book of yours—that I put in my pocket—will you allow me to keep it?”

“It isn’t mine—it belongs to Aunt Henny—but still I think you may; it will pass the time until it is getting dusk. And now really—good-bye,” and she held out her hand, then as he unexpectedly stooped and kissed it, she blushed up to her hair, and snatched it away.

“Look here, you will have to take the dog and shut him up,” urged Harlow totally unabashed. “Otherwise, he tells a tale!”

But ‘Uncle’ was not disposed to abandon his old friend, and had actually to be removed by main force, and carried—a lump of sullen, struggling protest.

Mrs. Riggs was amazed to see Miss Dargan crossing the road with that fat, heavy Bob in her arms—but the real reason for such unnecessary indulgence, she never discovered.

CHAPTER XI

TWO LETTERS

THE second post delivered two somewhat disquieting letters at the "Harlow Arms." One was for Mrs. Toler, the other for Jean.

"Ah, here is a screed from your uncle at last!" exclaimed the elder lady. "Now let me see what he has to say for himself?"

What he had to say for himself was unexpectedly disturbing:

"My Dear Henrietta,—I'm glad you are better; you should go up on the golf links and get fresh air, and not sit frousting in your bedroom as is your custom. All goes well here. I dare say you will be surprised to hear that Mimi has stepped into your shoes, and is keeping me company. She came up to inquire for you, and as I was alone, I told her to wire for her bag, and stop for a time. She manages the house all right, undertakes a lot of the dusting, has made herself useful, and can hold her tongue."

"Manages the house!" repeated Mrs. Toler, reading aloud, and her voice sounded strange and querulous. "I shouldn't have thought Mimi had had any experience of a large establishment—anyhow, I am sure she cannot cope with Mrs. Webb. Everything will be shockingly slack, and that woman will encroach worse than ever!"

"Perhaps Mimi is not so timid as you think," suggested Jean.

"Yes, she is," declared her aunt with emphatic conviction. "I am sure that poor girl is in a deadly fright, staying in the Square all alone with your uncle. Anyone could see that she is mortally afraid of him, and between him and Mrs. Webb, she will not find the house a bed of roses. I am confident that everything is getting disorganised, and out of my usual routine—I shall return to-morrow!"

Having made this surprising announcement, Mrs. Toler resumed her brother's letter:

"I daresay you and the child are better down at the 'Arms,' for in London the heat has been tropical. So do not hurry back on my account. I shall expect you when I see you. Mimi would send a message if she knew I was writing, but at the present moment she is washing some of my Nankin jars—and not before they wanted it!"

*"Your affectionate brother,
"Michael Dargan."*

"I must say I feel a little hurt that Mimi has not written," remarked Mrs. Toler with an injured air.

To this Jean made no reply; she was longing to get away and read her own letter, for a brief glance told her it came from Mincaster, the "Silver Crown Inn," and the signature was that of "Vernon Harlow." Her aunt was at that moment too ruffled, and too much engrossed in her own affairs to put her usual question of: "Well, dear, and who is your letter from?"

"I shall give Mrs. Riggs notice at once and warn Miller to begin to pack. We'll go up by the fast train to-morrow, and that will get us in nice time for tea. You might run and tell Miller I wish to see her."

Thus dismissed, Jean rushed to Miller's room, where she found her reposing in a comfortable chair, her feet on another, reading a sevenpenny novel. Jean delivered the message, snatched her hat out of the hall, and ran into the old walled garden, immediately followed

by three dogs. The girl was in a hurry—it might be rats!

There was no one in the big garden, except a man who was staking peas, and she sat down a little breathless, and drew out and opened with a beating heart, her very first letter from a young man!

“ Dear Miss Dargan,—I find that the sailing of my boat has been postponed till Saturday, which gives me an extra day, and I am anxious to have another look at the old place. I shall never, never forget your kindness and sympathy, and will carry the remembrance of it with me to the other side of the world. I shall be at the dell to-morrow about four o’clock.—I wonder if you will think it awful cheek if I ask you to meet me ?

“ Yours sincerely,

“ Vernon Harlow.”

“ About four o’clock to-morrow afternoon,” reflected Jean, “ we shall be arriving at the Square ; so even if I had wished to meet him it would be out of the question, would it not ‘ Uncle ’ ? ” turning to the dog. Yes, she would have liked to meet his master, he was so unusual and direct : she had enjoyed that little adventure in the fairy dell, but was not disposed to repeat it. Jean had inherited a good deal of prudence—from her Scotch mother—and she felt that if she were known to be holding clandestine meetings with the banished member of the Harlow family, there might be trouble.

An assignation with young Mr. Harlow was entirely out of her power, but it lay in her power to answer his letter, this she resolved not to do, and yet her heart was by no means hardened against him ; in fact it beat a little quickly, as she recalled his charming expression, and merry dark eyes ; and as she paced the wide walk, attended by the dogs—particularly “ Uncle ”—her decision was considerably shaken. At one moment she said to herself : “ He is just a reckless sort of young man who gets into scrapes himself, and would carry other people along with

him ! If Uncle Michael and Aunt Henny were to hear that I was meeting and writing to this stranger, I don't know what would happen ? Uncle Mick has frightfully strict ideas, and perhaps he would send me to a Penitentiary ! ”

“ But on the other hand, ” pleaded a voice, “ Vernon Harlow is a gentleman, he is apparently friendless in this country, and obviously heartbroken by the loss of his mother. Two or three lines on a sheet of note-paper will cost you nothing but a penny stamp, and no doubt would afford him some comfort. ”

When Jean had walked up and down the garden about twenty times, the Scotch streak in her character overbore sentiment and sympathy, and as she passed forth, she closed the heavy old door with a bang of finality. Her mind was fully made up, she would *not* write, even though “ Uncle ” trotted into the house in front of her and halting in the passage, actually sat up and begged !

* * * * *

Mrs. Toler and Jean arrived at the Square laden with country produce, and felt not a little damped when they found that there was no one to receive them save Johnson—grim and forbidding as ever !

Mr. Dargan was attending an important sale in Blackheath—sales were his principal relaxation, even if, as often was the case, he came away empty-handed.

“ Mrs. Brune and Miss Vole had gone to a *matinée*, ” announced the butler. “ But I expect them now at any moment, and Miss Vole said not to bring in tea till you was come. ”

As he spoke, aunt and niece entered the morning-room which was changed ; it looked strangely altered, gayer, lighter, the furniture more scattered, and there were quantities of flowers—flowers in extravagant profusion !

Now, although Mrs. Toler was excessively fond of gardening—or perhaps we should say fond of looking on, and advising, and exhorting, while others laboured—she

set her face against flowers indoors. They lasted no time, and their mute appeal for fresh water and their dropping petals were always a bother and reproach. But here, to her amazement, she beheld masses of tulips, purple iris, and a reckless supply of the most expensive, hot-house carnations—all exquisitely arranged. The chairs and sofas too, had been pulled about, and an undoubted “antique”—a rare Chippendale table—unearthed from some obscure corner. Yes, she couldn’t help admitting that the alterations were an enormous improvement—and wished that she had thought of them herself!

Two towering blue jars were posed conspicuously on a table, in order to be exhibited in a sympathetic light. For the last ten years she had sternly resisted those very jars—now, in her absence, they had snatched a victory.

As she halted in the middle of the room, glancing about rather blankly, Mrs. Brune and Mimi entered, acclaiming and gesticulating. The former accorded her friend a hearty welcome and a warm embrace. She was followed by Mimi, who looked remarkably elegant, and seemed to be delighted to greet both aunt and cousin.

“I am so glad to see you again, dear Aunt Henny, all the better for your change and rest. I suppose you know I’ve been your wretched understudy? I brought in all these flowers this morning, and arranged them to welcome you—a welcome from *me*!” and she squeezed her hand impressively.

“Thank you, my dear girl—and how are *you* getting on?”

“Oh, pretty well. I need not tell you I was immensely astonished when Uncle Michael invited me to come and stay until you returned, and I must confess that at first I felt horribly frightened, my teeth were almost chattering as I sat *vis-à-vis* to him in the dining-room. I think it was his eyebrows that overawed me! However, by and by I plucked up a little courage. ‘After all,’ I said to myself, ‘Uncle Michael is my own relation,’ so I

dusted the china, helped to start a catalogue, and contrived to keep in the good graces of Mrs. Webb."

"I am sure you have done everything beautifully, my dear," said Mrs. Toler, removing her veil and gloves, and seating herself on a sofa.

"Oh, no indeed, I've only managed because Mrs. Brune has been so kind and helpful—and told me about lots of things."

"Yes, we've had a ripping time!" put in the little widow. "I've dined here nearly every night, and the Great Mandarin actually took us to a theatre. Think of *that*! It's true, he growled and grumbled all the time, but Mimi and I enjoyed the play—and also the supper he gave us at the Carlton."

Mimi was certainly advancing with leaps and bounds. Here was Mrs. Brune calling her by her Christian name, and they appeared to be intimate.

"May I ring for tea, Aunt Henny? I'm sure you will want it," said Mimi with an air of affectionate solicitude.

The tea equipage promptly appeared on a well-burnished Sheffield tray—a long forgotten article, recognised by Mrs. Toler. Nor was the tray the sole surprise; another novelty took the form of savoury sandwiches! As Mrs. Toler tasted, and approved, her niece said:

"Yes, are they not good? I'm so glad you like them. I have given Mrs. Webb one or two recipes for savouries and things! You see, I'm quite a cook!—out in South Africa I was the cook-housekeeper. Mother taught me and said I had a taste that way. Uncle Michael was almost greedy over the *pâté de fois gras* sandwiches—he actually ate three!"

"Ah, I see you are introducing improvements, and making us move, my dear."

"Oh, no, indeed, dear auntie—I hope you won't mind my hunting out some old things and moving the furniture, and I am moving to-morrow."

"Certainly not, you must not dream of such a thing, just as I have come back; that would be too ridiculous."

"Well, thank you very much, I'll stay over the weekend, and then I must depart."

Alterations and improvements were not confined to the tea-table and the morning-room; there was a display of flowers and silver on the dining-table; salted almonds, and a toothsome savoury made their appearance, and Michael appeared to be unusually talkative, and in good spirits. Mrs. Brune remained to dinner; afterwards they played "Cut Throat" bridge, and the gallant Mandarin subsequently escorted her home.

The following Monday, Mimi returned to her country retreat; in spite of all that could be argued by Aunt Henny and Uncle Michael. Perhaps clever Mimi understood the art of allowing herself to be missed? At any rate, missed she was! In a few days, she sent an affectionate invitation to her aunt and cousin, begging them to come down and spend a long afternoon with her at Chesham.

In a neat pink cotton frock and picturesque hat, Mimi awaited her guests at the little station, escorted them through the winding street to her clean and humble lodgings; the sitting-room (as she had described it) opened straight into a little garden, gay with early roses, and fragrant with clove pinks—the floor was of brick, the chairs covered with black horse-hair. Next door was a large, old-fashioned kitchen, and up the steep, rickety stairs were three low bedrooms, their windows level with the floor. The visitors were ushered into the one belonging to Mimi, beautifully clean and simple. Certainly the jug and basin did not match, one of the chairs was minus a back, but it all felt so fresh and sweet with the country air blowing through the open windows, stirring the thin blue checked curtains, and a great bunch of York and Lancaster roses flamed on the little dressing-table. An excellent tea had been provided for the town guests; home-made bread, delicious butter, new laid eggs, and oh, joy; some early strawberries! When the meal was over, they all started out to explore the village, and to visit a fine old church.

"Everything is old here," explained Mimi, "that you can see for yourselves. The house I lodge in is said to date back to 1500, so no wonder it creaks all over and groans alarmingly at night."

"Any ghosts?" inquired Jean.

"No, I've not seen any yet; but the people are very superstitious and old-fashioned. Even now a motor thrills them, and they have rarely seen an aeroplane."

During the course of this conversation, Mrs. Toler discovered quite casually that Mimi was working for her uncle, typing a catalogue, copying long notes, and making frequent expeditions to the British Museum.

"And what about your other job?" inquired Jean, the downright.

"Oh, I gave that up some time ago. Uncle Michael pays me much better," she answered simply. "And of course to *me* the work is enormously interesting."

The visitors returned to London, carrying with them flowers, a little basket of fresh eggs, and a note and messages for Uncle Michael. They spoke in raptures of their excursion, of Mimi's quiet country retreat, and somewhat primitive quarters.

"Better invite her again," said the Mandarin. "She is doing work for me, and it's a bit awkward having her down there."

By degrees Mimi's visits to the Square grew longer and yet longer. Before October had settled upon Chesham, before the wind blew leaves and rain into the sitting-room, she had said good-bye to the cottage, and was firmly established under Mr. Dargan's roof, as one of the family—no longer ignored, but introduced as "my niece, Miss Vole."

She worked industriously in the library, dusted the most precious china, looked up sales and trains, escorted Jean to the dancing-class and college of music, was thoroughly at home, and a prime favourite with Uncle Michael. In his blackest and grumpiest moods she acted the part of David to his Saul, and even ventured to chaff

and laugh at him, and he, somewhat to the amazement of his sister, appeared not only to tolerate, but to *like* her impertinence! Mimi proved to be a wonderful help in the house; she removed many anxieties and bothers from the round shoulders of her aunt, who now felt free to go on an extended visit to her adored Tolerton. When she departed she carried Jean with her—for Jean, too, loved the country, and had often been at Tolerton as a child. The household there consisted of Lord and Lady Tolerton, the two Ladies, Marion and Ann; the eldest son was in the Army, and the youngest still at Oxford.

One day at lunch Mrs. Toler gave her relations a vivid description of her recent visit to the "Harlow Arms," and strongly recommended her brother-in-law and sister to go there for golf and a nice little change.

"You meet the most interesting people occasionally. Last time Jean and I had the company of a newly-married couple—we had only one sitting room between us!"

"Poor creatures! how they must have loathed you!" cried Lady Marion.

"I don't think they did: They took rather a fancy to Jean, invited her out motoring, or for strolls in the park, and they were music mad too."

"What were they like, Jean?" inquired her cousin Ann.

"Awfully nice, and nice-looking too, but *oldish*. I think Mrs. Alsager must have been thirty!"

"You call that old, Jean!" said Marion sharply, for Marion was thirty-one her last birthday; she and her sister who had liked and tolerated Jean as a child, were by no means fond of her now that she had developed into a pretty, animated little girl, of whom their tennis partners took unnecessary notice—and occasionally they administered to Jean a *coup de griffe*.

"Your paradise is not far from Mincaster," said Lord Tolerton, "the Harlows live thereabouts."

"Yes, their park was exactly opposite to the inn, and we were given free admittance."

"Sounds very unlike Harlow that sort of thing; he is a hard bitten, tyrannical old chap, and should have lived in the Middle Ages. I believe he worried his wife into her grave, and fired his youngest son out of the country."

"Vernon Harlow," supplemented Ann. "Such a nice-looking boy, I remember we used to meet him in town at dances."

"That was when he was in the Guards. He got mixed up in some practical joke, and had to leave," said her mother.

"No, no, that is a mistake, it was all about debts and a chorus girl," corrected Lady Ann. "His father stopped his allowance, and cut him off with the proverbial shilling. I believe he is now in America. I meet his brother George occasionally—such a silent, self-satisfied individual in the Diplomatic Service—but I've never ventured to ask for Vernon."

"I suppose Vernon took after his mother's family," said Lady Tolerton. "The Vansittarts had a wild drop in them, but they had one good trait—a Vansittart would give you the coat off his back! and old Harlow, for all his wealth, is a screw."

"There wasn't anything very wild about poor Mrs. Harlow," remarked Mrs. Toler. "I remember seeing her in church, a pretty, delicate woman, with such a sad, sweet face."

"Yes, she took all Vernon's scrapes to heart," said his lordship, "and was dreadfully upset when his father, who would not listen to her, forbad him the house, and accorded him the order of the boot."

"I remember she had a handsome fortune," said Lady Tolerton, "settled, of course, upon the second son, so one day Vernon will be independent of his tyrant, and no doubt will come back again a sadder, and wiser, young man!"

"He may be wise," said Ann, "but I don't think that Vernon ever could be *sad*; he was the most audacious,

high-spirited boy I ever came across; his tricks and scrapes were endless."

"And yet he was clever," said Lady Marion, "so they said, could learn more in one day than his brother in a month, he was very popular in the regiment."

"Oh, these mad, wild scapegraces are always popular," declared Lord Tolerton. "The elder brother is a dull dog, and a bit of a prig."

It is needless to mention, that, although Jean took no part in this conversation, she found it extraordinarily interesting, and was sorry when Lady Tolerton's move brought it to an end.

Her visit to the Court was not prolonged; young as she was, she began to understand that the happy, careless days, when she had been there in the nursery or riding the old pony or playing croquet with her cousins, were ended. She was in a sort of way *de trop*. Three girls were a crowd—even Mrs. Toler realised this. Her nieces were getting on; they had, to use a vulgar expression, "their own fish to fry," and Marion's disposition was inclined to be waspish. It would never do for one of their admirers, for instance, the young and well-born rector, or an adjacent baronet, to take up with this little red-haired sprite; no, no, she must go back to her lessons; and, so in charge of her aunt's maid, Miller, and with many mendacious regrets from the Tolerton family, she was carried to the station and despatched to London.

CHAPTER XII

DETHRONED

THE impression Miss Mimi Vole had made on her uncle had important practical results. She was now firmly established in the Square, and had removed into a better bedroom, comfortably furnished with couch, writing-table, and various odds and ends, "lifted" from other apartments, as she liked her surroundings to be luxurious and refined. Strange to relate, in spite of an impecunious condition, her personal belongings were of the daintiest description. Aunt Henny, who never ascended to her niece's bower, would have been astounded to behold such filmy dressing-gowns, saucy slippers, and beribboned underwear; the rows of powders, ointments, and washes, and the costly tortoise-shell toilet set, belonging to her penniless niece. Mimi was, before all things, exquisitely neat and orderly; she gave Evans little to do in the way of "tidying up," and to Evans she proved to be an insolvable puzzle—so meek and unassuming below stairs, and yet such a grand lady in her own quarters. She wrote numerous letters—posted by herself to save trouble; she also received a goodly number, generally addressed in masculine handwriting. She rose early, retired late; brewed herself private cups of fragrant coffee; smoked endless cigarettes—even before breakfast!—and it was actually Miss Vole, the poor relation, who introduced into that grim Georgian mansion the use of bath-salts! No doubt Miss Vole deserved her little indulgences, for she laboured industriously in the library, commenced the great catalogue, dusted specially precious

porcelain, conferred amicably with Mrs. Webb, and was a prime favourite with Uncle Micky. Thanks to her niece's energy and competence, Aunt Henny was enabled to remain month after month with her relatives at Toler-ton; she enjoyed a nice long holiday, far removed from domestic anxieties, her brother's growls, and Mrs. Webb's volcanic temper. By the end of November, when the leaves had fallen, the clouds hung low, and the croquet ground was a swamp, Aunt Henny, looking the picture of good health and good spirits, returned to enjoy a winter in town—that is to say, little dinner parties, the theatres, and bridge. Within the first few hours she became sensible of some vague mysterious change; the atmosphere of the house seemed colder, her brother gloomier and the usually radiant Jean appeared to be strangely silent, and depressed. On the other hand, Mimi, admirably dressed, and effusively affectionate, was excessively gay, and pleased with all the world—including herself. For a day or two, Mrs. Toler took things with her usual lethargic ease, superintended the unpacking of her many belongings, and, as Sunday was naturally a day of rest, decided to postpone all domestic worries until later in the week—as she felt nervously reluctant to cope with Mrs. Webb, and deal with her well-known grumbling, and insolence.

Michael Dargan, who had been born and educated as an Irish Protestant, adhered—at least outwardly—to his upbringing, and attended an Evangelical church in the neighbourhood of the Square. Every Sunday morning his upright gaunt figure, in a creaseless morning-coat, was rarely absent from a particular corner in a well-cushioned front pew. Dargan had never troubled himself with regard to the great changes which had swept over the Established Church during his long absence in the East, and he took up the Sabbath day routine precisely as he had known it as a boy; entirely ignoring memories of the laxity of those thirty-six years of gay and pagan Sundays in sunny Shanghai where—let it be

whispered—he played cards, and golf, and attended races, without a single twinge of conscience. *Autre temps, autre mœurs!* This was his ready answer to any argument. However, he appeared to have changed his opinion with the climate. Neither cards, piano-playing, or even chess, were tolerated at number two hundred-and-two the Square. With praiseworthy punctuality, the master of the house attended service every Sunday, because his father had done the same; and in one particular—where his parents had failed—he contributed generously to the offertory!

In good sober truth, Michael Dargan gave little thought to religion. During prayers, and a generally narcotic sermon, his mind was concentrated on an approaching sale of china, horrible thought! a suspected fake; or a burning jealousy of some rival's prize. If Dargan had any creed, he was an unconscious Buddhist. The many years he had lived surrounded by the atmosphere of Buddhism had achieved a certain result, and it was counted to him as a righteous but eccentric deed, when he commanded the restoration and setting in order of all family graves and monuments in Rossmullen damp old church, and overgrown graveyard. The parish of Rossmullen had never heard of "the worship of ancestors." Yet another fact: he looked upon death with a fearless eye. When the King of Terrors sought him, he would find him ready to depart! He could bid farewell to his little red-haired niece, to his easy-going sister, in fact, to all his friends, without one pang. Of course, there was the china! A fragile fabric, which had seen so many men and many centuries come and go, that it seemed to be almost immortal. One precious piece in his possession could count eleven centuries, *bien sonné!* Yes, he would be rather sorry to sink away, and leave his treasures to the mercy of strangers. Perhaps the collection should be assigned to Henny! She was an honourable and honest creature, and would take good care of it—though she knew no

more about such valuable stuff, than the fellow in the pulpit!

At the present moment, it so happened, that Mrs. Toler, who was sitting beside her brother, was conscious of a flushed face and a suffocating sense of injury. Instead of enjoying her usual complacent conviction of being one of the best dressed women in the congregation, she had found on entering the pew, that Mimi had seated herself in *her* place, next to Michael; she had also annexed her specially high and comfortable hassock. With an irritable gesture, she murmured: "*Please* move up!" Mimi did so immediately, but it was Mimi who produced the key of the book box, distributed its contents, and found the lessons of the day for her uncle—a most unnecessary and officious performance. Yes, Mrs. Toler began to fear that her dear Mimi was distinctly pushing, and inclined to take too much on herself, and whilst Michael's thoughts were bent on a contemplated trip to a notable auction in the Midlands, she was tormenting her usually placid mind over the problem of a masterful and obtrusive niece, and, for a moment, a dark premonition crept into her thoughts. However, after the service had ended, and they were walking home, a few sweet words from Mimi, and a caressing squeeze of her fat arm, dispersed such detestable anxieties; the dear unselfish girl only wished to make herself *useful*. "Ah, yes," muttered a mischievous thought, "but why did she plant herself in your place, and annex your favourite hassock?" Oh, but this view of the matter was so wrong, argued Aunt Henny, especially as she was just returning from the House of God; it would be too dreadful if she were becoming jealous, and suspicious, in her old age!

"Black" Monday morning, when so many interviews and intentions are carried into painful execution, was passed over by Mrs. Toler, with half-hearted excuses to herself. For example, it was best to make a start in the *middle* of the week, this would give her time to turn

round and brace her nerves for her visit to Mrs. Webb—and the lower regions. On Wednesday morning, and not sooner, she was prepared to face the ordeal! On the self-appointed day, reclining in a comfortable chair, with a novel in her lap, Mrs. Toler, so to speak, began to pull herself together; she must take over the keys from Mimi, and once more thrust her shuddering neck under the domestic yoke.

Turning to Miller she said:

"Will you go down to the library and ask Miss Vole if she can spare a few minutes to come and speak to me?"

Within an unexpectedly short time, the door opened to admit Miss Vole, looking tall, sedate, and slim, wearing a becoming dark red winter dress.

"Well, dear," began her aunt, "I thought I'd just send for you to have a nice little private talk. I want you to tell me how Mrs. Webb has been going on? Does she still take two evenings out a week, and insist on a cold supper on Sundays?"

"Oh, no, Sunday supper is entirely a thing of the past, and, as you know, we have moved on the weekly dinner to eight o'clock—half past seven is so heathenish!"

"I can't think how you've managed it! Dear me, Mimi, what a clever girl you are," turning sharply to look at her. "Quite *too* wonderful! I've been lucky to have had such an understudy for the last few months. Well, now I must take up the reins again, so you can hand me over the housekeeping accounts—and that badge of office—the *keys*!"

For a moment Mimi made no reply, then she sat down, and confronting her aunt with a peculiar smile, enquired:

"Did you not get a letter from Uncle Michael, telling you that he wished *me* to do the housekeeping?"

"No, not a line," rejoined Mrs. Toler. Her face had suddenly flushed.

"Coward!" said Mimi to herself. "And he has left *me* to tackle this hateful job single-handed!"

"Oh, well, he said he would write. He likes the way

I manage things ; he enjoys my tasty little dishes—Mrs. Webb allows me to do some cooking—he fancies I am more up to date ; and, after all, you see I had a good deal of experience in South Africa—and you know, darling Aunt Henrietta, you don't go down into the kitchen oftener than once in two or three months ; most of the plate is locked up, there are no flowers, and Evans, the housemaid, is allowed to choose the table linen ! Please don't think I'm saying this in a spirit of criticism—but you know you are not strong, the stairs are trying, you cannot be always rushing after the servants ; and Uncle Michael agrees with *me*, that it really is asking too much of you to undertake the whole burden of this great house and its large staff."

"And so the burden is to be transferred to your shoulders," said her aunt, "and virtually you will be mistress ?"

Mimi gravely nodded her head ; she had become uncomfortably aware that there was likely to be a scene. After a moment's hesitation she continued :

"Well, you know, dear Aunt Henny, I work at the catalogue, I wash and dust all the best china, I read up accounts of sales—and Uncle Michael declares that I am indispensable."

"Yes, I suppose you've made yourself so—as secretary, companion, and housekeeper. But where do I come in ?"

To this question Mimi made no reply, but considered the carpet with a small set face, and tapped her foot noiselessly.

"There is certainly no room for *two* mistresses in this establishment, and after acting as hostess for twelve years I cannot very well subside into a back seat, can I ? I may not be a practical cook, and I confess that I never was able to cope with Mrs. Webb ; still, I believe I've always made your Uncle Michael comfortable and his friends welcome ; anyhow, there have been no complaints !"

"Of course, all that is true—but Uncle Michael thinks the trouble is too much for you ; it was different twelve years ago, when you were *younger* ; Johnson objects to plate-cleaning, Evans cannot do flowers, and you know, dearest Aunt Henny, you have always said you hated town life ! "

" It is not very tactful of you to remind me of my age and infirmities, my dear Mimi, and as for hating town, that I certainly do—for all the year round." She paused for a moment, and sat with her eyes meditatively fixed upon her niece.

Undoubtedly this clever niece was about to thrust her out of her comfortable home. Yes, Mimi had proved herself to be the historical viper on the hearth ! If she chose to sacrifice her pride, and remain, it would be at a heavy cost ; she saw herself relegated into a social limbo and labelled as " Old Aunt Henny." Well, she had enough to live on, she could take a cottage, pick up a couple of old servants, and settle down in Tolerton. There were always her relations, friendly neighbours—no uncomfortable brother to please, and no smooth-faced, insidious young woman to deal with !

" I'll think it over," she said aloud. " Of course, as long as I remain here, I shall sit at the head of the table."

Mimi, who was surprised and relieved, at such an easy victory, instantly exclaimed :

" Why, of course you do, dear Aunt Henny ! I'm really taking a lot of bother off your shoulders. You know how I like to be busy and useful, I cannot *bear* to sit idle, but I shall remain in the background, and you will be mistress and hostess—as *always*."

" The figure head. Very well, we shall see. But now, Mimi, do tell me—what has happened to Jean ? She looks a different girl to what she was some months ago ; she seems so quiet and dull—why, her very hair has lost its lustre ! "

" Oh, I was not aware of any difference," replied Mimi, in her airiest manner. " Then, of course, I see her

every day. Perhaps she *is* quieter, and doesn't burst out with stupid jokes, and flatly contradict Uncle Michael—which is an immense change for the better. For one thing, she has been regularly attending classes; really, for a girl of her age, I consider her terribly backward. So Jean has been working. She has taken up music more seriously; besides that, her great friends, the Warners, have left the Square, and gone to live at Eastbourne, as she and those girls, Billy and Silly, were always in and out of each other's pockets—naturally she misses them a good deal. And then the Mackintoshes who had a flat near Lizzie Brune, have lost their mother, and have departed to live with relations in Edinburgh. So Jean's little circle has been more or less broken up. The result is, that she feels rather out of it—and, consequently, dull. Of course, this is not a congenial household for a young girl of eighteen—but that can't be helped! Well, now I must fly back to my catalogue; but I do hope, darling Aunt Henny, that you will find the arrangement more comfortable for you—and all for the *best*."

As time went on, Mrs. Toler—good, easy soul—failed to find the new arrangement "comfortable," much less "all for the best." Certainly, Michael was unusually genial and brotherly—his manner was apologetic—almost timidly propitiating, and he carefully maintained the conversation upon the safe and steady level of talks of "old times."

At little luncheons and dinner parties—which were admirably cooked and served—she noticed that the guests were chiefly strangers; younger and smarter than the old rank and file, and that their talk lay among artistic subjects: pictures, books, and, above all, china. Such topics as bridge, the weather, and servants were never introduced. It was true, that she presided at the head of the table, and that Mimi appealed and deferred to her continually, but it was evident, nevertheless, that where Mimi was placed—looking so charming and

vivacious—was the real “chief seat” and focus of attention; moreover, her supplanter sat at table with the serene manner of one well accustomed to preside.

After one of these entertainments, Mrs. Toler climbed up to her bedroom, locked the door, and sat down to analyze the situation and meditate upon her future. She realised acutely that she had remained away from the Square too long. Three delightful months—with the exception of a couple of days for the sales—indolence, and love of Tolerton, had been her undoing. Yes, she had been a domestic failure—too selfish and indolent in not entering into her brother’s interests; not displaying any energy in housekeeping. Recently she had punished herself by rising half an hour earlier and cutting off her early tea—but these sacrifices came too late. She was practically deposed from her place; a feeble impulse of resistance had faded, the sceptre had passed into an unrelenting grasp, and Mimi reigned in her stead! Mimi was cunning and clever—she was also unscrupulous and ungrateful—perhaps she had plotted this *coup* from the very moment she had set foot in the house! Well, being a sensible woman, Henrietta Toler realised that nothing would be gained by struggling or quarrelling—she would take leave quietly, and with all the dignity she could assume. Nevertheless, she would not forgive Mimi—the girl whom she had succoured and befriended, on whom she had bestowed money, clothes, and affection, and for whom she had smoothed her path with rugged Uncle Michael. Unless she was mistaken, Jean would be the next to be turned out of the nest by this human cuckoo; then she would have the home to herself and wind Michael round her little finger. For all his stern and morose appearance, Michael was a moral coward—and extraordinarily accessible to flattery. Coward or no coward, she determined before leaving to, so to speak, “have it out” with her brother, and knowing Mimi had gone to a concert with Mrs. Brune, she sought and found him alone and defenceless in the library.

"Well, Michael," she began briskly, "I want to speak to you."

"No, no, not now," he protested, as he half rose from his chair. "I'm most awfully busy," and he waved her away with an outspread hand.

"It's now or never," she rejoined, as she seated herself. "Mimi informs me that she is to keep the keys and manage the house in the future—in fact, she has been doing it ever since I returned—I think you might have given me at least a month's notice!"

"Oh, well, my dear Henny, you see you are always so taken up with your bridge and amusements, and Mimi is young and energetic, and a rattling good housekeeper. She manages Mrs. Webb, has got us out of the old rut of roast beef, jam roll, and tapioca puddings; the meals now are always an agreeable surprise!"

"Yes, I daresay—and the bills, too!"

"Oh, hang the bills! Anyhow, we have savouries and soufflés, curries, and Russian salads—and all sorts of good things."

"But how does Mrs. Webb turn out these dishes? She is only a very plain cook, and her ideas are early Victorian."

"She has a French kitchenmaid."

"*French!*"

"Yes. I believe they fight like cats—but that's no matter. They don't understand a word of what they are saying to one another. Mimi keeps the war entirely confined to the lower regions, and, as a rule, matters go smoothly—though I have heard now and then a noise like two angry cockatoos! Mimi is a wonderful girl! You'll allow that?"

"Yes," assented her aunt, "almost *too* clever!"

"Clever! By Jove, yes; you should just see the catalogue she is making; and she nosed out and put me on to a bit of the finest glaze I have ever seen. She has all her wits about her, looks after my china, and runs the house."

"And proposes to run me out of it!" supplemented Mrs. Toler, with a forced laugh.

"No, no, no, my dear Henny. The girl loves organising, it is her *métier*, and she will take the bothers off your shoulders—that's all. She's popular, too."

"So I gather, and has made a number of new friends."

"Yes, that's a fact. Artistic people, collectors, cultivated folk who write and lecture, and are dead keen on china, jade, and lacquer: sort of crowd that *you* have no use for—and quite harmless."

"When I think of that evening ten months ago, when Mimi took refuge here—stranded, penniless, and drenched with rain—and you wished me to turn her out then and there—and would have done it but for me. As I look at this girl *now*, ordering the household, receiving guests, answering correspondence, always charmingly dressed and absolutely at her ease—I feel as if I were dreaming."

"She certainly has a wonderful fascination, and is most infernally sharp. I can't imagine where she got the brains."

"Why, from Anthony Vole, of course! He was brilliantly endowed, and could persuade people to anything—you know that for yourself. He persuaded half the country to empty their pockets, he persuaded poor Julia to run away with him—he was the king of liars and schemers. I will not say that Mimi is a liar—but she certainly *is* a schemer."

Michael frowned upon his sister, then, leaning back with his hands in his pockets, he delivered himself of this pronouncement:

"After all, Henny, I don't wonder that you are a little vexed. I suppose it's only human nature; but I'm getting old, and I confess I like my little comforts. I don't care for solid joints, monotonous and tasteless puddings, that one *has* to eat—to get rid of! I enjoy dainty dishes and having my palate tickled. I dislike hearing of rows among servants, and how the second

housemaid won't stay, and how Mrs. Webb sells the dripping and meat; and I was a bit bored with your ugly, elderly women, and their Bridge lunches and gabble. You see, I am speaking plainly—like yourself. Now, Mimi gives me ease, comfort, and valuable assistance. I have not known such good cooking since I was out in Shanghai. She invites amusing and congenial people—for instance, that black bearded fellow who dined on Tuesday—he's Sir Tancred Bussell, one of the greatest collectors of Lac in Europe, and Mrs. Lovell—the little yellow haired woman—has a pair of Sèvres vases quite unique, and worth four thousand pounds. Colonel Rankin, who has been quartered in China, is a collector of teapots, and a very fair judge of blue porcelain. Now these people and I have a good deal in common."

"I suppose so," assented Mrs. Toler, "and I'm afraid that in many ways I've been lazy and remiss—yes, Micky, I ought to have studied you more. I realise that, and I should have got rid of Mrs. Webb. Too late now—Mimi has got rid of *me*. There's just one thing more I wish to say—do not allow Mimi to turn the child out. Unless I am mistaken, she will be the next to go—and *she* has no home. However, once I am settled down, she can come to me—and I will be glad to have her."

"What infernal rot!" he exclaimed angrily. "Jean's home is here—here now, and always. Don't talk nonsense!"

"Well, if I'd been told last February that my own niece would come and turn me out within a year I would have sworn that that was nonsense, too."

"But why should you go, Henny? The girls must have a chaperone."

"Thank you, no. I'm not cut out for a chaperone; I think I'd find that even harder work than toiling up and down the back stairs. Mimi accused me of being shamefully slack in my visits to the kitchen—to this I confess I plead guilty. I shall settle at Tolerton,

probably in Parkland Cottage, if it is vacant, where there is only one flight of stairs—and will be all right.”

“ I am sorry you are taking it like this, Henrietta.”

“ I think I am taking it very amiably. I’ve lived here for twelve years as mistress——”

“ And can live here twelve more if you like ! ” he interrupted.

“ But not as mistress and manager—only companion and sheepdog.”

“ Oh, well, at any rate you’ll come up and down pretty often—your own room will be always ready. You won’t go off suddenly, I hope—you must wait a bit.”

Mrs. Toler hesitated for a moment, conscious that a hasty word might do irreparable harm.

“ Of course, for the sake of appearances, I’ll wait a decent time, for, even from your point of view, the situation will require some explanation.”

“ I don’t see that at all,” he argued angrily.

“ Yes ; our old friends will wonder why I am leaving you ? What is to be said to Mrs. Brune and Sir George ? ”

“ Oh, Mimi will explain—she and Lizzie are as thick as thieves.”

“ Well, anyway—Lizzie is no thief.”

“ What—you don’t mean that Mimi is ? ”

“ Not in the way of stealing objects like money and jewellery—she steals one’s friends, and places. Some to whom I introduced her, scarcely notice me now when *she* is present.”

“ Henny ! I had no idea you could be so bitter.”

“ It’s Mimi’s ungrateful and underhand ways that have embittered me,” and tears glittered in Aunt Henny’s eyes. “ I wish you could have seen her smile when I asked her for the keys ; and you must remember that we know so little of Mimi—only what she has been pleased to inform us herself.”

“ The poor girl has had a bad time—she has told *me* a good deal.”

“ I wonder if it’s true ? Now and then, her tales are

like the flats of a theatre, they don't join—a liar should have a good memory. Some of her South African days and dates seem hazy."

"Henrietta! how can you say such things! You must remember that she's your own flesh and blood."

"Only in part. Has it ever struck you that Mimi has very deceitful eyes." A pause. "She must be every day of eight and twenty, and she has been knocking about the world on her own for years."

"No, no, not knocking about; she lived with her brother on a mealie farm till he married, and her sister-in-law behaved to her like a she devil."

"I know," rejoined Mrs. Toler, with a sniff. "We have not heard the other side of the story—or what the sister-in-law says!"

"Come, come, Henny old girl, don't put my back up! Mimi or no Mimi, you and I are the only two of the older generation left. Remember, that you always have a home here."

"Thank you, Michael," she faltered. "You have been a good brother, and I shall always remember your kindness; but I don't think you will very often see me in the Square."

"You won't be leaving for a good while, I hope."

"No; I'll promise to stay for a few weeks and get my teeth overhauled. This will be rather a tedious business—and I must try and cheer up poor Jean. After that, I'll bid you farewell, and will leave Mimi to explain and invent, any reasonable or likely excuse for my departure."

CHAPTER XIII

EXIT AUNT HENNY

WITHIN six weeks, Mrs. Toler had left the square, carrying in her train a van-load of luggage, which included two special arm-chairs, a favourite chest of drawers, and a crate of ornaments—Chelsea and Dresden china—Toler belongings, utterly condemned and despised by her brother; for him it was Oriental—or nothing!

The leave-takings passed off smoothly, Mimi and Jean accompanied Aunt Henny to the station, and the former supplied her with an armful of papers and magazines, and covered a somewhat shrinking face, with soft and lingering kisses.

The exodus of her aunt was glibly explained by Miss Vole whenever such explanation was unavoidable. She told an elaborate and plausible tale.

“For a long time, the poor darling had found London so rheumatic, and the great flights of stairs at Number 202 too painfully trying—it has been heartbreaking to watch her climbing to her room!—if only Uncle Michael would have consented to live in a nice large flat—but where in that case, would he store all the priceless blue china?”

The information was accepted by Mrs. Toler's circle with surprising equanimity. Alas! how soon the steady Bridge player, and genial hostess is forgotten—particularly if she is worthily replaced by a younger and more vivacious woman! The two who really missed Mrs. Toler, her placid manners, and her kind, pretty face, were Jean, and Major Warren. They enquired about her with

a persistence that was secretly annoying to her successor, wrote to her from time to time, and issued bulletins of her health and doings. Michael, sitting at the head of his table, preoccupied and aloof, rarely made any reference to his next of kin. With a mind and habit hardened by years of separation, he had but little affection to spare from his sacred collection ; indeed, it was whispered that his heart was entirely composed of blue porcelain. As for Mimi, she had thrown herself into the matter of the catalogue with her usual energy, and seemed to be remote from every other interest in life. She managed her uncle with extraordinary art and skill, flattering him, and hanging on his utterances in a manner, to which he was totally unaccustomed ; she never interrupted, but listened with profound interest, or reverential awe to whatever he vouchsafed to impart—subsequently quoting his opinions as oracles. Major Warren soon saw through Mimi's little game ; and how she played on the old man's vanity, as if it were some stringed instrument—whilst he accepted her flatteries, her idea of himself, and herself, as if it were gospel. Her importance in the establishment was now unquestioned, and the first word her uncle uttered when he entered the house, was : “ *Where is Miss Vole ?* ”

These were dull days for poor Jean ; who spent many long and lonely hours, in the bare back-room, which held the piano, and over-looked a level strip of grass, and some tall, straggling plane trees. Downstairs she felt herself *de trop* ; Uncle Micky rarely addressed her, and when he did, Mimi invariably interposed, and thrust her neck and crop out of the conversation. Abandoned to her own resources, she felt more or less disconsolate and depressed ; she had so little in common with Mimi, or Mrs. Brune ; was considered too young for cards, or convivial little dinner parties ; now and then she encountered at tea, members of the new set, moody young men, with lank, long hair, and lank, long hands, wise old bearded professors, and above all experts, who wrangled amicably

with their host, and liked to talk endlessly and unrestrainedly about china. Some of the young men were pleased to notice Jean—who was now eighteen, and rapidly coming to her own in the way of good looks; but the stern hand of her cousin kept her relentlessly in the background; and it was evident that she did all in her power to hold her, and her Uncle Michael apart. Their former good-fellowship had come to an untimely end; it seemed incredible, that once upon a time, she had sat upon his knee, had rumbled up his grizzled locks, and dared to chaff him; she now rarely saw him alone; after breakfast he departed to the library, and she to a class; after lunch he disappeared to his Club, and she to practise upstairs, or to go a round of shopping-errands with Evans, the upper-housemaid. Soon after dinner she was hustled off to bed—but sat up rebelliously for hours—burning the electric light, reading and sewing in her own room. Her sole pleasure lay in letters from absent friends—including Aunt Henny—most of her associates had left London, and she was not encouraged to replace them. If by any chance, a fellow-pupil invited her to lunch or tea, Mimi's reply was invariably a negative.

"Supposing," she said to herself, "she had even a cat or dog for company, something to play with, or talk to!" But the mere idea of a cat or dog in the vicinity of Mr. Dargan's priceless collection, was of course out of the question. The cat, has a bad character with regard to china, and even a dog is capable of smashing a piece worth two thousand pounds.

But one staunch friend still remained to Jean, and that was Major Warren. He dined in the Square once a week—worked for a few hours with Uncle Michael, and now and then, took Jean for a turn in the Park, or a tea at Rumpelmeyer's. Never robust, he looked positively ill—so shockingly worn and wasted. It was abundantly evident that Mimi had no liking for this particular friend of the family. She ignored him as much as possible

in conversation, sneered at, or interrupted his few remarks—in short, her manner was that of a hostess, turned to ice.

On the other hand, Major Warren was always assured of a warm welcome from Dargan, who loudly commented on his lack of appetite, and his hollow countenance; heaped his plate, and filled his glass with a bounteous hand, and after these Sunday dinners, would withdraw with him into his own room, there to indulge in a smoke and a long *tête-à-tête*. These *tête-à-têtes* were undoubtedly annoying to Mimi; she had a tell-tale countenance, and her eyes, as she watched the couple disappearing into the library, held an unpleasant expression.

About this time, Jean began to discover that she had always distrusted and disliked Mimi, and—yes, bold thought—had disliked her from the first! She was so strong-willed, so decided, so extraordinarily cool, and clever—she ruled the whole establishment with a soft-footed step, an iron hand in a velvet glove, and a clear decisive voice. Mimi was never unpunctual, never out of temper, and never taken at a disadvantage, in the position she had so quickly and effectively assumed.

Jean was also assured of one fact, which was this—Mimi did not like her.

One evening, when sitting together in the morning-room, she happened to look up impelled by some inscrutable instinct, and caught Mimi's eyes surveying her steadily over the edge of a novel; the expression they wore was distinctly malignant, it implied an impression of crafty malevolence—no other word would fit that glance; perhaps Mimi was jealous because Uncle Michael had bestowed upon her an expensive fur coat? Jean often recalled the look she had caught unawares, and when Mimi was laughing and beaming upon her, she knew in her heart that her cousin detested her, for all her clinging caresses. One Sunday night at dinner, when Mrs. Brune and two or three other neighbours were present, Major Warren, by way of a little conversation said:

"I think I saw you this afternoon, Miss Vole, but you did not see me."

"Probably not," she answered, indifferently.

"You were at the Zoological Gardens, with an old fellow I used to know out in South Africa—Anton Van Dele."

Mimi had suddenly grown red, her face contracted, and looked puckered and wrinkled, the corners of her mouth and eyes curled up, and gave her the appearance of an astonished and furious imp! No, no, it was not the face of Mimi Vole, but that of an entirely different personality. However, the change was so momentary, that it was scarcely noticed, save by Major Warren and Mrs. Brune. The latter said to herself:

"Hullo! I see the Major has put his foot in it!"

In a second Mimi was herself, cool and patronising—her invariable attitude to a man whom she distrusted and detested.

"I'm afraid you've made one of your *usual* funny mistakes! I never go to the Zoological Gardens, I particularly dislike beasts, tame," and she threw him a glance, "or otherwise, and as for your friend from South Africa, I never heard of him till this moment!"

"Ah, well, I suppose it's just one of my usual blunders," and he looked at her fixedly. "The lady was uncommonly like you." Then turning to Dargan, he added in a low voice:

"Anton Van Dele is a Jack of all trades, a queer, mysterious sort of chap."

But Mimi of the pointed ears (which were concealed under her hair) had wonderfully quick hearing, and she instantly leant forward, and said:

"I am sorry you think that I am likely to be met going about London in 'queer' company."

"Oh, of course, I didn't mean that, if I had, is it likely I'd have mentioned it? I'm afraid you jump too quickly at conclusions, Miss Vole," he added, with a touch of temper.

And from that moment his fate was sealed, the decline

and fall of Major Warren was assured, for Mimi's mind now held two forces against him—hate and fear.

By clever, cautious, and insidious degrees, she undertook his secretarial work ; Warren had been in the habit of coming four times a week to write letters or go errands for the great Mandarin, but Mimi snatched this task into her own hands ; when he would arrive of a morning, it was frequently to find that all the correspondence was finished—Othello's occupation was gone ! And with respect to his attendance at outlying sales, Mimi warmly assured her uncle that the poor Major looked so decrepit and delicate, that he could hardly drag himself about, and that it was a positive cruelty to send him any distance where he would be standing in draughty auction rooms, and she would undertake the business herself, and, indeed, she would *like* to do so, she urged, as she learnt much that was useful, and Major Warren had not at all a reliable memory, whereas her own, held everything in a sort of stickfast ! ”

And so by degrees, gradual and almost imperceptible degrees, Warren was superseded. When he called at the Square it was often to be informed that Mr. Dargan had gone out for the day ! The weekly dinner still remained an institution, but his welcome from his hostess was tepid, and Dargan appeared so absorbed in his thoughts and General Sir George was abroad—that he quietly withdrew, and his place knew him no more. Of late his health had been failing, his cheeks had become hollow, and the sharp lines in his handsome face had deepened perceptibly.

Although Major Warren ceased to visit the Square he and Jean met continually ; she would look in at his rooms in Montague Street, undertake his errands on wet days, and bring him books and cigarettes ; these rooms were undoubtedly shabby, but spacious ; good old-fashioned apartments, in a good old-fashioned house—the retreat of an officer and a gentleman.

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Aunt Henny had returned to Tolerton feeling unusually small—although there was no visible reduction in her outward appearance. After having reigned for twelve years the mistress of a fairly large establishment she was now resuming her former position, as the satellite of a great house. However, this was infinitely more supportable than to remain in the Square subordinate to Mimi her niece, and obsessed by the realisation of her own helplessness. Her husband's brother and his wife were generous, warm-hearted folk, who never administered a pin prick. Now Mimi was a past mistress of the pincushion! Her pricks were sharp and deep and never failed to rankle. In the morning at breakfast-time, she received the letters, and distributed them, opened the papers first, and glanced over them; it was she who rang the bell for breakfast to be served; turned on and extinguished the electric lights about the house at her own good pleasure; changed the laundry, which had washed for the family at number 202 ever since they came into residence—these were but small pinpricks, nevertheless they hurt. Moreover, Mimi was as a forbidding figure to her aunt's friends, and usually wore an air of cool toleration, or sat in the seat of the scornful! She treated her relative—especially before people—as something between an imbecile and an invalid, and the poor lady could make no stand against the determination of her attitude. Nevertheless, Mrs. Toler held fast by her pride; it supported her at Tolerton, where Mimi's excuse was warmed up for general consumption. "London did not suit her—she really could not live there any longer—the fogs and the damp were too much for her constitution," only to her sister-in-law did she divulge the tragic truth; and Lady Tolerton, being a strong-minded woman, listened to the tale aghast and incredulous.

"You should have turned her out, my dear Henny, you are much too trustful and easy going," she declared. "I would have made short work of such a young woman!"

"Ah! you might, perhaps, but you don't know Mimi. She is so plausible, so inflexible, so determined and formidable. I am sorry for poor Jean and Michael. Mimi is a she wolf in sheep's clothing!"

"Those sort of wolves should be *shot*," declared her ruthless sister-in-law. "You poor dear, how abominably she has treated you, what base ingratitude! Your brother is too much absorbed in his china to make any move, Jean is too young and foolish—this dreadful interloper will have it all her own way."

With tears in her eyes, Henny replied: "I don't think there will be much doubt about that. Her mother, my sister Julia, was extraordinarily obstinate; *she* called it being strong-minded; but she had a warm, kind heart. Now Mimi has inherited her obstinacy, but has *no* heart whatever; all her kisses and caresses mean nothing; she has no natural human feeling, no pity. I shall never forget how she once tried, until I interfered, to deal with a stray cat!"

Lady Tolerton was anxious, and indeed insistent, that her sister-in-law should make her home with them. She would have been glad of her as a safety valve, companion, and confidante; the Ladies Marion and Ann, her two handsome daughters, who were still unmarried, held themselves somewhat aloof from their parent; their plans, their proposals, were never revealed; they went hither and thither on long visits and returned empty-handed—that is to say, without any immediate prospects of matrimony; they had ceased to take an active part in the garden, and their visits to the village were now spasmodic—they had other interests. Marion had taken up golf, and Ann was a notable bridge player. At the ages of thirty and thirty-one, the girls had their own resources; Lady Marion, the elder, cleverer, and better looking, entirely dominated her more pliable sister, selected her frocks, and her friends—and occasionally appropriated her admirers. Henrietta Toler was a sensible woman, at any rate in some ways; she resisted Lady Tolerton's

eager appeal, as she preferred to live alone, and be independent. By a great piece of good fortune, her former cottage, Parklands, happened to be vacant, and here she decided to pitch her tent! The rent was low, she would have the use of one of the Court gardeners, game and fruit and other subsidies would come her way (as formerly); and with two maids and Miller, and her jointure of five hundred a year, she would be comfortable, and contented.

Soon after Christmas the cottage was papered and painted, and put in thorough order; the alterations supplied unlimited interest to the ladies who visited it daily, and carried away a certain amount of paint and varnish on their skirts. Then there was the matter of furnishing to consider; the chest of drawers and two arm-chairs from the Square would not go far, and Mrs. Toler felt shamed-faced and mean in receiving from the Court many good family pieces, which she had bestowed when she left Parklands on a former occasion, and, as she supposed, for good! Her sister-in-law assisted her with carpets and curtains and the pick of the Court attics; she took out some of her savings at the bank and bought new beds, good drawing-room and dining-room furniture. The drawing-room at the cottage was particularly charming, with chintz covered chairs and handsome cabinets—(returned)—pieces of china, some exquisite water-colours and heaps of books. A room was set apart for Jean, but whether Jean would ever occupy it was another affair. Her Uncle Michael had flatly refused his sister's urgent appeal "to allow Jean to live with her." "I am very fond of Jean," she pleaded. "You have one of our nieces, and I think you might spare me the other." Needless to say, this was also Mimi's point of view, but in some respects Michael was as obstinate as his sister Julia; he would not spare Jean, save for a short visit; her home, he declared, was with him, always—he had made that promise to her dying father, and nothing, either in Heaven or hell would induce him to break this,

However, Jean was permitted to come down and spend a few weeks with her aunt just before Easter. She helped to arrange the rooms, and worked in the garden, and was continually busy indoors and out.

Parkland Cottage was delightfully situated ; it faced due south, and was a real sun-trap, with ample bow windows, which gathered in every ray. Though called a cottage it had some pretensions, such as a gate lodge and avenue. There was a good-sized kitchen garden, with fine walled fruit, pretty pleasure-grounds surrounded the house, a pair of fierce monkey puzzles guarded the croquet ground and a great myrtle grew over the front door, also a Gloire de Dijon rose. In short, no prettier nest could be found for an elderly lady in retirement. Mrs. Toler's interest in the village was still maintained, same as when she was the wife of the rector. During the years of her absence, her humble friends and little secret charities, had not been forgotten. Strange to say, she had been uncommonly active in parish work, and was even now, far more energetic, bustling and authoritative than in London ! somehow the tall houses, the crowds and traffic, the dirt and dust had had a deadening and demoralising effect upon Mrs. Toler, who was ever at heart, a country mouse.

Jean found her cousins—by courtesy—much more reserved and critical than formerly ; but their father and mother were just the same ; so were the people in the village, gentlefolk and others. Miss Boland, the daughter of a former rector, still insisted, when you called, on telling you, at great length, the whole plot of the last novel she had read. Mrs. Baxter, another old resident, discussed her illnesses with full particulars, and took her temperature three times a day. No one was much changed, except Jean herself—she was now grown up, and had developed into a pretty, pale girl, with rather timid manners. The more she saw of the cottage, the more she hungered to remain : here was employment, freedom, dear old Aunt Henny and a new dog ! No sharp speeches, no gloomy

rooms, no solitude, oh, if Uncle Micky would only spare her—they would never miss her in the Square—but Uncle Michael, like Pharaoh, King of Egypt, hardened his heart and refused to let her go.

CHAPTER XIV

AN EXCHANGE OF SECRETS

As the winter advanced, and the days grew longer and colder, Warren appeared to dwindle and shrink; the old shooting coat he wore, looked three sizes too large for his wasted form, his hands were almost transparent, his cough appallingly hollow, and he never crossed the threshold. His was a lonely existence; he had withdrawn himself so effectually from the world that many of his former friends believed him to be dead, and indeed from a social point of view, dead he was, though actually living in Montague Street, Bloomsbury. Warren's sole visitors were the landlady's cat, and Jean Dargan. The monstrous grey tabby much preferred the Major's company to that of his mistress, and spent all his spare time upon the comfortable drawing-room hearth-rug—thereby causing Miss Tooke (an old maid) who had reared him from kittenhood, pangs of acutest jealousy.

Now and then she would fly up, fling open the door, and ask in a tone of suppressed bitterness:

"Is Tom here, sir? Then *come* along, Tom!"

Thus the friends were parted, and Warren was abandoned to other consolations—such as his pipe, his books, and his dreams.

Sometimes he would close his eyes and summon visions of long ago, a cinematograph of the past. Familiar faces—the sun-baked plains of India, the polo ground, the Mess, the line of march on a crisp mid-winter morning.

Ah, he had not half appreciated those good, gay times—who then would have believed, that he would end his

days in a London lodging—alone and forgotten by all, save one kind-hearted little girl!

Jean's visits were at all hours, and almost daily. She ran in, bringing life and sunshine into the gloomy premises. Her light step on the stairs, her voice, were as a cordial to the sick and lonely man. She dusted his few treasures, darned his socks, changed his library books, bought papers and tobacco; also flowers. With respect to these flowers, there had been a little difficulty. Jean had never forgotten "Warry's" kindnesses over a space of years; how he always remembered her birthday, her special taste in sweets and story-books, and was ever her defender and champion, and she was feverishly anxious to testify her gratitude by bringing him flowers, delicacies, and new books; but in spite of her pleading and tears he was firm in his refusal.

"Dear child," he said, "I accept the will for the deed, and am more than grateful; if I, as you say, gave you many treats long ago, you forget that *I* shared them; they were a great pleasure to me, and if we were to square accounts, where should I be, without my messenger, seamstress, tea-maker, and playmate? If you like to bring me a few flowers now and then, you may—and I shall have the extra pleasure in watching you arrange them."

To this fiat, Jean was compelled to bow, but she secretly supplemented Miss Tooke's housekeeping, with cakes, cream, new-laid eggs and fruit, all of which were suppose to be "extras," and lumped as such in the weekly bill. Warren in these days felt too ill and languid to go into Miss Tooke's "book," but he sometimes thought that her account was unexpectedly moderate—possibly because he was so chummy with her adored Tom?

One bitterly cold afternoon, Jean arrived with a brilliant colour, wearing a new fur coat, and bearing in her hands a great bunch of violets, a bag of tea-cakes, and three novels.

"A sight for sore eyes!" exclaimed Warren, as he surveyed her.

"Yes, my new fur coat—isn't it a beauty? Uncle Mick gave it to me. It cost ever so much. As much as a blue saucer!"

"Turn round, and let me have a good look. Yes, it's uncommonly smart. Take it off indoors."

"How are you to-day?" she inquired, now coming over and looking down at him with a gaze of wistful questioning.

"Oh, middling. Those violets are splendid—what a perfume! 'Czars,' no doubt! Put them in water and then we will have tea, and a real good old gossip."

As Jean stood arranging the violets, he asked:

"Any news in the Square?"

"No, we are as dull as a last year's newspaper. You should just see us after dinner. Uncle Mick reads, Mimi writes letters, I play Patience. We never utter a single word, and at ten o'clock I march off to bed—delighted to depart!"

"I don't wonder! Ah, here comes the tray, and Tom. I expect he has visions of shrimp paste—you make the tea and I'll toast the buns."

"Certainly not, that's *my* job," protested Jean, kneeling at the fire, toasting fork in hand.

"How is the old man? I haven't seen him for months, he never comes to look me up—though he knows I've been seedy."

"No," admitted Jean a little shamefacedly. "And I can't think why, because he likes you—likes you very much."

"Then I can tell you why, Mimi won't allow him to cross my doorstep, she's afraid I might tell him something."

"But what could you tell him?" inquired Jean.

"Ah! That's my secret! My own opinion is that her position in the Square is the result of a deeply-laid scheme; she has her uncle completely under her thumb."

"Yes, isn't it amazing. Uncle Mick of all people!"

"But we know how the great Leviathan may be led by a hook in his nose!"

"And what *is* the hook?"

"Flattery and cunning. She has eliminated Mrs. Toler and me, and you, my dear little Jean, will be her next victim. Before very long you will be dislodged!"

"Oh, well, I shan't mind much; it's all so changed the last twelve months. I never dare chaff Uncle Micky now. He won't stand it at any price. You remember the fun we used to have quarrelling over the Squares—he all for Bedford—I for Russell—and when I said that in Russell Square the trees were taller, the birds sang better, the houses were finer, how he stormed in a good-natured way as if he enjoyed it! Now, it would be as much as my life was worth to breathe a word against Bedford Square or anything else."

"And so you sit mum! Poor Jean! What hard lines on you who are a born talker."

"Yes, what else can I do? If I speak I am shut up or snubbed. I'm not allowed to bring a girl home, or go out to a *matinée*, or a lunch (not that I have many invitations in these days). I mayn't even choose my own hats; Mimi bought me an awful thing the other day, which as Mrs. Brune said: 'Only the very dowdy, or the very smart, could wear!' I look a show in it! When I put it on Mrs. Brune laughed till she cried! And I am not supposed to go out without Evans, the housemaid, tied to my tail. You know, I spent a delightful visit at the cottage with Aunt Henny, she wanted to keep me altogether, but Uncle Michael would not hear of it."

"I say! what a dog in the manger! I wonder you are allowed to come here?"

"Oh, Mimi doesn't know anything about my visits—or pretends she doesn't, which is all the same. Uncle Michael's at his club, she goes to bridge parties, my classes are closed for the present, and I needn't tell you that I'd a million times rather be here with you

than sitting alone in the morning-room twiddling my thumbs."

"Tell me, how is Mrs. Brune?" he asked.

"Oh, she is as usual, very lively and full of go—she has some lovely new frocks."

"Yes, she knows how to dress, and no doubt pays a price, but to me, she spoils her appearance by overloading herself with jewellery, brooches, and bangles, and ear-rings, and she has a mania for chains. She must have had something of the Indian squaw in her remote ancestry. Some day it will be her turn, and then she will be chucked out of Number 202!"

"Oh, no, you are wrong. Mimi is devoted to Lizzie Brune; they are always going about together. I do believe she *loves* her!"

"Yes, with the love of the serpent for the bird! No, no, Mimi will require a clean slate, and be the sole heiress to Dargan's money and the great china collection. I say, what an awful thing for Mimi if your uncle took it into his head to marry Lizzie Brune."

"Yes, he likes her immensely. I've seen him stroking her hair, and holding her hand."

"Oh, well, he won't get any further than that, I can promise you. Mimi will crush all rivals out of existence—just as if they were so many black beetles."

After a moment's silence Jean went on:

"I've noticed Mimi going down to the lower regions looking as grim as death. I think she has been trying to get rid of Mrs. Webb."

"This then is the second attempt! About five years ago there was an idea of 'getting rid of Mrs. Webb,' the meat was so leathery, the fowl so muscular, and the soup so weak that Dargan declared she must be dismissed. He mentioned this after long and protracted struggle with the body of a duck—which ended in the duck leaving the dish for the floor. In the hearing of Johnson he commanded poor Mrs. Toler to give the cook notice next morning. Johnson, his master's body-servant, is an

efficient butler and valet, as you know; and with regard to his clothes and so on your Uncle Michael is as helpless as a child. Like most men who have spent years in the East, and been accustomed to a 'dressing boy,' he requires to have his belongings collected and laid out—his shirt-studs and links put in. I am not sure that Johnson does not put on his socks! Anyhow Johnson is indispensable, and it was a terrific shock to your uncle when he heard him say:

" 'Beg pardon, sir, but you were speaking of giving Mrs. Webb notice.'

" 'Yes, nothing but tigers and alligators could masticate what she sends up.'

" 'I'm very sorry, sir, but if she goes, *I* goes too.'

" 'What!' he shouted.

" 'Yes, we are old friends, and have been together a matter of twenty years. We were with Sir Gregory Black, you know. Butchers and tradespeople round here are uncommonly awkward and disobliging. Maybe, if Mrs. Webb were to make a change——'

" 'Then your uncle said:

" 'Perhaps in that case *we* need not make a change. Well, I'll see. I'll give her another week.'

" 'I noticed that there was an immediate improvement; it was well worth Mrs. Webb's while to stick to the Square. So she introduced fine spring chickens and early lamb, and the rebellion, so to speak, fizzled out in mint sauce.'

" 'I believe Mrs. Webb says that *Mimi* is a lamb.'

At this announcement Major Warren laughed, and laughed so long and heartily that he brought on a violent fit of coughing. After a moment he gasped out:

" 'Mrs. Webb is embedded in the basement, nothing but dynamite will move her; she is married to Johnson, and between them, they make a good thing out of the business.'

" 'Webb married to Johnson! Oh, no!' and Jean surveyed him with round-eyed wonder.

" 'But why not? I admit that neither of them is young or beautiful, and their characters leave something

to be desired, but theirs is a partnership that cannot be dissolved. This is for your ear alone. I hope you can keep a secret ? ”

“ Oh, yes, and if you will tell me your secret, perhaps I will tell you *mine* ! ”

“ All right—well, let us have yours first ? ”

Here he was interrupted with another bad fit of coughing, and Jean got up and fetched him a restorative in a glass—she knew her way about the room, and its resources—then she brought eau-de-Cologne, and shook up the cushion in his chair. When he had recovered a little she said :

“ Warry, you smoke a great deal too many pipes ! I shall certainly tell the doctor.”

“ Oh, tell away, and I’ll tell him what a kind little ministering angel you’ve been to me—bringing me books, doing all the errands, playing piquet, scolding me, and spoiling me ! ”

“ Now please don’t talk like that,” she protested. “ I wish I could do something for you that would be of *real* use. If you could only be spirited away to some nice, warm place, and get rid of your hateful cough.”

“ No use thinking of that, my dear child ; my bad health has been a dreadful handicap, but I don’t believe it will bother me much longer. Now pour me out another cup of tea—the stronger the better ! ”

As she handed him the cup, he said :

“ The next thing on the programme is for you to tell me your secret.”

“ Well, you are the only person to whom I have ever mentioned it, and it’s not much of a secret after all ! I don’t know if you remember last year how Aunt Henny and I went down and spent a day with Mimi in the country. She was lodging in such a funny little rickety house with a red-tiled roof and creaking stairs. You walked straight into the sitting-room from the garden. We climbed up to Mimi’s bedroom when we arrived to take off our things, and after tea I dashed up again to fetch

down our hats and parasols. By mistake I burst into the wrong room ! ”

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed Warren laying down his cup. “ What did you behold—Bluebeard’s wives ? ”

“ I saw a man lying on the bed with his boots off, and I distinctly remember his smart, purple socks. He looked thoroughly at ease, and was smoking a pipe, and reading a pink paper. ”

“ Did you see his face ? ”

“ Only partly—he had dark hair and eyes ; he stared at me over the edge of the paper, and shouted at me to ‘ get out. ’ ”

“ And naturally you got out ! Did you happen to mention this episode to your cousin Mimi ? ”

“ Yes, I did, when we were by ourselves on the platform, and aunt was buying picture post-cards. I said, ‘ Oh, Mimi, I blundered into the wrong room—there was a man there, and he seemed so angry. Who is he ? ’ I recollect she grew quite red and said, ‘ Oh, he’s the landlady’s son ; the poor fellow has got a day’s holiday from working in a factory in Acton, and he is taking a good rest in the country. ’

“ But I thought you told me that the landlady was an old maid ? ”

“ And what did Mimi say *then* ? ”

“ She looked as if she would like to box my ears, but all she replied was : ‘ Of course, I meant her *nephew* ! ’ and then the train came puffing in. ”

“ Certainly that was a peculiar discovery, and unless I am mistaken, thereby hangs a tale ! But I don’t call that much of a secret, mine is worth two of it. Anything more ? ”

“ Worry, you are insatiable. Well, let me think. I know something odd, but it is no secret. ”

“ Proceed, ” and he waved a ghostly hand.

“ One day Mimi and I were together in the morning-room ; it was early, *long* before lunch, when a strange woman, a sort of half-lady, was shown in.

Mimi exclaimed, and grew scarlet, the other calmly said : ' I've had no end of trouble to find you, Mimi, but I've run you to earth at last ! ' and she seated herself in an arm-chair as if she had come to stay. Mimi was as it were, struck dumb ; I saw her mouth twitching and the veins in her forehead standing out. At last she said : ' Run away, Jean, this visitor and I have business together,' and so of course I had to scoot. She stayed for over half an hour, and when she departed I peeped over the balustrades, the woman looked awfully pleased with herself, and I saw Mimi kiss her with effusion. As soon as the door had closed on the friend, Mimi turned to Johnson and said : ' Why did you admit that person, she is out of her mind and dangerous. On no account is she ever to enter this house again.' "

" What was she like ? "

" Dark, rather stout, with big, black eyes, and shabby. She wore a grey coat and skirt, a mangy boa, and a hat with dirty white ostrich feathers."

" Did she repeat the call ? "

" No, I think not, and Mimi never alluded to her, but I feel sure she hated the woman, who had a sort of half foreign air. That's all—now for your secret. Fair play, please ! "

" Well, it's this ; between you and me and the cat, I saw Mimi when I was in South Africa on that second trip."

Jean laid down the sock she was darning, and stared.

" She has never heard this, yet I believe she has an uneasy feeling, and a dim idea that I *know* something."

" What do you know ? "

" Various small matters ; for instance, that most of her pitiful story is false—the tale of a brother and his wife, and the mealie farm, are all the purest invention."

" Worry ! but how did you discover this ? "

" You see, I went about a good deal in the way of business, and I lived in clubs and heard a lot of talk. It seemed that Vole had arrived from England with wife

and daughter, and gradually worked himself up the ladder, and became one of the prominent financiers, and lived in princely style; the horses, motors, and balls were all there! But rich or poor, he never could run straight—he was suspected of illicit diamond smuggling on a large scale, and besides this, he had made enormous losses in various wild cat speculations, and died a pauper, with a bad reputation. Mrs. Vole, who was always respected, tried to pull things together, and Mimi went on the stage. I saw her once at Johannesburg."

"Acting?"

"No, dancing a *pas seul* as Signorina Mimita de Manteiga, a Spanish prima donna with jet black hair, short yellow skirts, all spangled, black shoes and stockings—a study in black and yellow."

"Like a wasp."

"Mimita de Manteiga was an accomplished performer, she had the true Spanish method and vitality, graceful and tireless, with an abandon and devilry that was infectious, and brought her showers of bouquets and shouts of rapturous applause. So perhaps you can imagine how surprised I was, to see la Signorina stroll into the library in the Square that Sunday evening—looking as demure as a quakeress. I believe the dancing was only a temporary affair, though Mimita enjoyed the excitement, admiration, and notoriety, but Mrs. Vole *hated* it with all her heart, and later on, she managed to carry off the star, and fix her at Durban."

"Oh!" ejaculated Jean, "I wonder you never told Uncle Micky this or let him hear something of Mimi's former career?"

"In the first place, Mimi is his niece, and I did not like to intrude into family affairs. In the second place, I have too many hateful memories of South Africa, and never wish to hear of the country again—for it was there I sunk my friends' money, and my own future."

"Yes, yes, poor Warry, I know all about that," said Jean, putting out her hand to touch his sleeve. "Aunt

Henny told me, and I'm most frightfully sorry for you, but do let me hear some *more* about Mimi, as I shall probably have to live with her for the rest of my natural life!"

"To rake up your cousin's past would have worried the old man, and done no good. Mimi Vole is much too clever and unscrupulous for any of us to deal with. She is firmly established in the Square, and there she will remain as long as your uncle lives."

"But do tell me more about her," persisted Jean. "I promise you most faithfully that I will not repeat a word."

"Well, she really *is* Vole's daughter and your cousin, and so far, her story is true. Mrs. Vole, your aunt, settled down at Durban, where she opened a small, private hotel. The hotel flourished, and then Mimi married."

"What, no, not really," gasped Jean.

"Really and truly, a good-looking ne'er-do-well, and unless I am mistaken, your find at Chesham, reading the *Pink'un*—so very much at his ease—was Mimi's husband."

At this moment the door was flung wide, by Miss Tooke, who mumbled an unintelligible name, and a tall, distinguished woman, in magnificent sables, advanced slowly into the room, casting, as she approached, a look of comprehensive inspection. Her eyes fell on the red-haired girl in a smart mauve blouse, who, having discarded hat and coat, had evidently been making tea; then at the haggard, prematurely aged man sunken in an old leather arm-chair, and she paused.

"Why, Madeline!" exclaimed Warren, in a key of breathless amazement.

"Madeline," whoever she might be, did not move; her face was livid, her expression that of one who has just received a violent shock.

At last she stammered out:

"Edgar, I heard you were ill so I came to see you," then she turned and glanced interrogatively at Jean, who had risen and pushed back her chair.

"This is Mr. Dargan's niece," he explained in a husky voice, "who kindly takes pity on me, runs my errands, and occasionally honours me with her company at tea. Jean, this is my sister, Lady Whittingham."

Lady Whittingham immediately subsided into the vacant seat, and murmured in a broken voice:

"Oh, my dear Edgar, *what* have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing," he replied with a melancholy smile. "It is merely the family complaint that has done for me!"

"Oh, no, don't say that!" and as the stately visitor burst into hysterical tears, and sobbed aloud, Jean silently withdrew, softly closing the door—upon what was evidently a scene of sorrow and remorse.

CHAPTER XV

OPEN DEFIANCE

Jean had been continually to Montague Street without let or hindrance, but strange to say, to-day, as she turned the corner into Bedford Square, her cousin swooped upon her, and said sharply :

"Jean ! I've been walking behind you, and saw you just now coming out of Major Warren's lodgings !"

Her pale, heart-shaped face, expressed unqualified disgust.

"Oh, yes, but you know, I often go there," rejoined Jean boldly. "Poor Warry cannot get out, his breathing is so bad, and I do all his errands. Miss Tooke is a crabbed old person, so madly jealous of the cat."

"Jealous of the cat ! How *can* you be such an idiot ! His breathing bad ! Nonsense ! The old soldier is just trying it on. Mind this," and she halted on the pavement, "you are never to go there again alone—remember that !"

"Why not ?"

"Why not ?" repeated Mimi excitedly. "Because you're nearly nineteen, and grown up, and Major Warren is an unmarried man. We don't want any scandal in the family !"

"But Warry is old—and most frightfully ill. I really believe he is dying."

"Dying ! Bah ! He has always looked like a death's head, and is just a parasite who lived on Uncle Michael until I interfered ; now he is hanging on to *you*, you silly girl ! I suppose you give him your pocket money ?"

Jean turned upon her cousin with a blazing face, and said :

" Mimi, how can you be so odious and mean ! It was *you* who got the poor fellow turned out of the Square—we all know that—you, who moled, and stole his poor little job, but I shall stick to him, and I'll go and see him whenever I please. You have no authority over *me*," she concluded breathlessly.

Here indeed was open defiance ! Mimi had no idea that Jean was such a spitfire, or had it in her, to break into open rebellion.

" Oh, all right," she retorted, " we will see about that ! I shall ask Uncle Michael to speak to you. I suppose you will mind what *he* says ? "

As they were now on the steps, and Johnson had answered the door, further debate was postponed.

Jean kept her word and went round to Montague Street the following day, taking grapes and a special magazine. Perhaps there was a slight element of cowardice in this expedition, as she happened to know that Uncle Michael and Mimi were attending an important sale at Christie's. When she encountered Miss Tooke in the hall, the old woman shook her head, and said :

" He's in a poor way I'm thinking, the visit of that lady yesterday was too much for him ; he has had what they call a—Hem—something—the doctor's been, and made him go to bed, and sent in a nurse. The lady has been here, and she's above stairs now, maybe you'd like to see her ? "

" Perhaps she wouldn't like to see me ? Anyway, will you take up these grapes and this magazine—which I know he wanted particularly."

In a few minutes Jean beheld her tall and elegant ladyship sweeping down the stairs ; she approached with an outstretched hand, and said :

" Oh, Miss Dargan, you dear, kind, little girl ! Come up, I want so much to talk to you."

As soon as they entered the shabby sitting-room—

which, like a well-preserved old lady, still held a certain amount of charm—she turned to her with tears in her eyes, and said :

“Edgar has been telling me all about you ; how he has known you ever since you were a child, and how since he relinquished his job with Mr. Dargan you have stuck to him through thick and thin ; mending his clothes, dusting his books and our few old family relics—and——”

“Oh,” interrupted Jean. “Please don’t—I’ve done nothing worth your thanks. I like him so much, and I do feel so sorry for him. He seems so entirely friendless.”

“I am sure, my dear girl, you don’t mean that as a hit at me ! But even if you did, it is thoroughly well deserved. Listen,” and she leant forward, speaking impressively, “there were only the two of us, Edgar and myself ; my father was an Indian general, who, when he had nothing to do, after an unusually active career, took to speculating and lost most of his money. Edgar caught the infection—he wasn’t exactly a gambler, but he was optimistic, and absolutely certain that whatever he put money into was bound to succeed, and make his fortune. Apart from all this, he was a smart officer, and loved his profession. He did well out in South Africa and India till he met with a bad accident at polo, and was retired and invalided on a small pension. Poor Edgar had never any what is called ‘push,’ but a horror of self-advertisement—lots of people never knew that he has the D.S.O. As soon as he quitted the Army, he came to London with the ridiculous idea of making his fortune in the City. The poor fellow was always easily imposed upon, believing everyone to be as honest and straightforward as himself. I am sorry to say that he was also invariably *obstinate* and would not listen to advice. He took up a wonderful investment, and with him it became a kind of craze ! He developed into a sort of missionary ; preaching the prospects of the railway line, far and near. He had a clever partner, a brilliant, unscrupulous adventurer, head of a syndicate of professional thieves, and Edgar was

his unconscious tool. Between them, they persuaded many people—including a number of Edgar's late brother officers, and old friends—to invest money, in more or less large sums. As the success of the project was a dead certainty, Edgar, who can be wonderfully persuasive, actually induced my husband to throw ten thousand into what proved to be a quagmire. The affair wobbled on for a time, the directors drew huge salaries—then came the great crash; the line, from which such splendid things were expected, came to an end in a vast, impassable swamp. Edgar lost all his money, and every one of his friends forsook him—and fled. There's nothing that touches people so acutely as money, they are really much more sensitive about their pockets than their pride. My husband dropped all correspondence with Edgar, and forbade me to receive him; and Edgar, who was feeling desperately sore, wrote a foolish letter, and there the matter has rested for the last eight years. Edgar was too proud to write, and so was I, but I happened to hear that he had found a nice, soft billet, and was secretary to an elderly gentleman, who would probably leave him a large fortune."

Jean could not help smiling.

"Oh, yes, that's the way people talk!" said Lady Whittingham, "and it was through *talk* that I discovered Edgar! I met a woman out at lunch two days ago, she was discussing old blue china, and a Mr. Dargan's splendid collection, and how a mysterious niece had unexpectedly appeared in his family, and entirely dominated the old man. It was as if he had been bewitched. She had induced him to expel his sister and Major Warren, his secretary, for no reason whatever but simply to please *her*! The sister had betaken herself to other relations, and Major Warren was living in lodgings near Bedford Square in miserably poor circumstances, and in very bad health—so naturally here I am!"

"And I am so glad to see you," said Jean. "It was only yesterday that I was saying how I wished that I

could do something for Major Warren, or that he could be moved away, and you will do everything, won't you?"

"Need you ask? Of course I shall, my dear child. I intend to take him down to Ventnor to-morrow, and I'll secure a first-rate nurse, but I'm afraid—oh, I'm *afraid*—I've come too late," and tears ran down her cheeks.

"Oh, don't say that!" protested Jean. "For a long time he has looked very ill, but was able to get about; it is during the last three months that he seems to have failed and been confined to his room—and his cough has become so incessant."

"And you have been his only friend, you good little thing! When I came here yesterday and asked for him the old woman was doubtful about admitting me, and told me, with mysterious nods, that the 'young lady was with Major Warren.' Need I say that I felt furious—he was never a man for love affairs since the girl he was engaged to died—and when I saw you, you pretty little red-haired creature, so much at home, so entirely at your ease, I felt half inclined to throw you out of the window!"

"Easier said than done," rejoined Jean, with a laugh. "I do gymnastics, and am very wiry and active; but do please tell me what the doctor says about your brother?"

"He thinks it a serious case, unfortunately consumption is in our family. One of the lungs is nearly gone; another factor is that Edgar rather wants to die, and that's a heavy handicap. He feels, poor dear fellow, that he hasn't much to live for! The doctor is returning this afternoon and bringing a specialist. Ah, there is a motor at the door now! I know that Edgar would have loved to see you. Perhaps he may later on at Ventnor, you might come down and pay us a little visit, but just now I must hustle you away," and she stooped and kissed her.

The next afternoon when Jean called in at Montague Street she was informed that the Major and her ladyship

had already departed. He had been "took away in a motor ambulance along with two nurses," announced Miss Tooke with swelling importance. "Tom is terribly put out!"

If the landlady felt any regrets at losing a gentlemanly lodger who never gave any trouble, and paid his rent to the hour, these feelings had evidently been soothed and tempered, by a handsome present from the lodger's sister.

CHAPTER XVI

TEARS AND SNEERS

ABOUT a week later, on opening his morning *Times* Michael Dargan suddenly exclaimed :

"Hullo ! Hullo ! So Warren is dead !"

He paused expressively, and stared at Mimi over his pince-nez.

"Oh, dead is he ? He always looked a ghastly wreck, and as if he were walking about to save his funeral expenses. It seems rather sudden," and she went on calmly buttering her toast. But Jean, after a glance of horrified incredulity, hastily dragged out her handkerchief to staunch the ready tears.

"Here's the announcement," continued Dargan, reading aloud : 'Warren, at the residence of his sister, the Countess of Whittingham, at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, Major Edgar Warren, D.S.O., late of the Moonraker Rifles, aged 47 years.' Well, poor fellow, I'm sorry for him," he added. "He had his faults, and was a bit pig-headed, but he was one of the most upright and honourable men I ever came across—although they *did* make him a bankrupt ! He was the sort of chap who always stood in his own light."

"It never struck me that he had much light to stand in," sneered Mimi. "To me, he appeared extraordinarily dense !"

"Of course we know that you never liked him," broke in Jean, in a voice trembling with passionate emotion. "But uncle and I did—did we not, Uncle Michael ?" appealing to him with streaming eyes.

"Oh, yes. I remember him well—a small boy when

his father commanded at Hong Kong—a smart, handsome little chap, every one's favourite. I'm sorry now," he went on moodily, "that I never went round to see him, but I did not realise he was dangerously ill, and I had a sort of idea that he felt injured, and took himself off in a huff. That was the impression he gave you, eh, Mimi?"

"Oh, no, no indeed, Uncle," protested Jean. "Major Warren was not offended, he liked you ever so much, but he realised that he was no longer wanted. Mimi had taken his place, *she* knows; she always hated him!" Then rising and pushing back her chair, Major Warren's champion almost ran out of the room. The result of this conversation was that Mimi instantly decided to take drastic measures to rid herself of this spiteful minx.

An early post had brought Jean a long and affectionate letter from Lady Whittingham, describing the death of her brother :

"The journey," she said, "proved too much, he was so weak; but we had three days together; he sent you his love, and said you were to have his African ring and any of his books you chose to select. Dear little Jean, you and I must never lose sight of one another; you were a real sister to my poor brother."

A change was brewing in the grey corner house, Jean missed her sick friend, her little circle grew more contracted, time hung heavily on her hands, she was sick of the daily round, the common task, and was sensible of a passionate reaction against her life, and a sort of wild impatience. Her uncle was now so glum, Mimi so inquisitorial and despotic—personally she felt that she had lost all energy, and sense of the glow of life! One dull afternoon Jean rose from the piano and went and stood with her forehead pressing against a window pane, staring down upon the plane-trees. She was sensible of a rebellious state of mind—she felt out of herself—and for the moment out of Bedford Square! She had been playing

some of MacDowell's compositions, "To a Water Lily" and "To the Sea—from a wandering Iceberg." Was her future existence ever to be like this? That of a frozen, insensible form, surrounded by a vast expanse of empty, grey ocean? How was she to alter such a condition, to find interests, in short, to *live*? Most girls of twenty had lovers. Her nearest approach to a lover was a certain young man who sat in a certain seat in church and stared at her adoringly, but naturally he never told his love, if love it was? Then there was Vernon Harlow. She had not heard of him for two years. If she had answered his little note, would this have made a difference in her future? If—if—if—what a foolish little word—a mere conjunction.

After all it was a fatal mistake to be so subservient and enslaved. Why should she not break loose from Mimi? Aunt Henny was just now from home or she would fly to the cottage, but there were the MacIntoshes in Edinburgh who would receive her with open arms. She loved the MacIntoshes; she might stay among them and give music lessons as she had certificates. Yes, she decided that she would throw off the yoke. She had ten pounds of her allowance in hand, would write to Elspeth MacIntosh and make a start the day after to-morrow. Inflamed by this idea, she rushed to the piano and played "Anita's Dance" from Peer Gynt, with extraordinary verve and enthusiasm. As she struck the last chord, the door opened, and, amazing occurrence,—Mimi entered.

"All in the dark!" she exclaimed. "What was that hideous thing you were playing, Jean?" Then, without pausing for a reply she went on, "The rector and Miss Cobb are downstairs, they have come up about the Sunday school concert. I've promised that you shall help. I'm afraid they will expect tea—such a bore!"

Jean rose from the piano in silence. The habit of obedience was fixed. She was filled with a realisation of her own tragic helplessness, she could no more escape from Mimi, than a fly from a pot of honey; oppressed by this

overwhelming conviction, she followed her cousin downstairs; little did she imagine, that the same crafty cousin was already weaving a scheme, that would dispose of her altogether!

Yes, Mimi was making arrangements to get rid of her incumbrance; that outbreak at the breakfast-table had served to hasten matters. In Mimi's opinion, the girl was growing much too independent, and would become before long, a dangerous element in the household. She was grown up, passably good-looking, and had no occupation beyond practising her music, embroidering tea-clothes, attending lectures, and reading.

Undoubtedly Uncle Michael had still a sneaking partiality for her, and unless Mimi was mistaken, this sharp, inquisitive inmate had considerable capacities for mischief. She therefore cautiously approached the subject one evening after Jean had retired. Uncle Michael happened to be in a particularly genial humour; he had bought a bargain of a jar in a dirty little shop at Eltham, and was nursing and admiring it on his knee—precisely as a woman would a baby!

"A fine bit," remarked Mimi, "though Jean thinks it too hideous for words."

"Oh, Jean knows nothing about china—though she was born there," he added with a grin.

"Yes, she dislikes it rather than otherwise, and calls us 'china maniacs.'"

Uncle Michael looked at Mimi from under his heavy brows and scowled:

"Where is she now?" he asked in his grating voice.

"Oh, she went to bed hours ago!"

"Why does the girl go to bed? Why can't she sit down here with us?"

"Perhaps she does not care about our company," suggested Mimi with a smile. "At any rate she always looks bored to death. Dear Uncle Michael, I want to talk to you about Jean. We must face facts. This is rather an uncongenial house for a young girl, is it not?"

"I don't know what you mean," he answered snappishly.

"Well, you see, she is now grown up, nineteen last birthday, and as someone has said 'pleasure is the business of youth.' Jean has not much pleasure. Of course, you and I do not look for it, but naturally she does—she is a young, dissatisfied creature. You and I have our own absorbing pursuit. We cannot take the child into society, such as balls and dances, or invite young people here. Her old associates and schoolfellows are no longer in the neighbourhood, and I don't think she has made any new friends. Then, again, we are out of the current of gaiety. The girl has little to do, and looks dull and dispirited."

"Oh, well, there is an easy remedy for that. She can go down to Henny—lots of amusement and young people there."

"No, I'm afraid that would not quite answer. From a word Aunt Henny dropped, I gather that the Toler girls don't want a young companion, who would be likely to snap up their own not too numerous admirers. Lady Ann and Lady Mona are no longer what the Americans would call 'buds,' and talking of 'buds,' I have a grand idea."

"Humph! Then let's hear it?"

"You know, Uncle Michael, that in these days of change and progress many young women qualify for some profession and means of earning their bread. Take myself, for example! I am a capable secretary, I can type, and do shorthand, and am an expert in Oriental china. Now, I do think Jean might fill in her long, long, empty days by learning to specialise in some useful line."

"Learning, good Lord! Why, she's always at it, with her music and dancing, drill, and lectures!"

"Yes, but these are of no use for earning money."

"There is no occasion for Jean to earn. I promised her father that I would provide for her, and I have done so in my will."

"Yes, I'm sure of that, you kind, generous uncle, and I hope you may live to be a centenarian. Meanwhile, Jean ought to be occupied. I don't mean to infer that otherwise she will get into mischief, oh, no; but almost every girl now has a trade. Some take up upholstery, some decorating, some gardening. Now Jean would love that, she is so fond of flowers, and of the country as well."

"I see no necessity for this sort of tomfoolery—the girl's proper home is under *my* roof."

"Of course," assented Mimi heartily. "She would always return here as a dove to the ark, but I feel sure that it would do her no end of good to go to a hostel for two or three years, and learn gardening; she would have fresh air, young companionship, nice long holidays, and an occupation entirely after her own heart. By the time she was one and twenty she would have a profession—although she need not exercise it. If the next two or three years were spent in some charming country place I am certain that it would do the child a world of good!"

"Certainly the girl looks pale and peaky, and seems to have lost her spirits—she never cheeks me now."

"No, I'm glad to say she is getting more sense, and as to her health and appearance, I am afraid that town doesn't agree with her."

"No more than it did with Aunt Henny, eh?" he said, as he considered her gravely, from underneath his thick brows.

But Mimi met this unexpected thrust with a bold, gay smile.

"Poor Aunt Henny! she was so rheumatic, it was really too painful to watch her crawling up and down stairs. As for Jean, why you've only to look at her white face!"

"Then you think she'd like this gardening business?"

"Yes, I'm sure she will jump at the idea," rejoined Mimi with conviction. "I'm told there is a delightful hostel in Blankshire—Marklands—a lovely old place, so well run—just like a country house, with a nice class of girls and first-rate teachers—but it's rather expensive."

"Oh," he ejaculated. "I thought the pupils were paid for their work!"

"Not at all, dear uncle, they are apprentices and pay heavy fees. Then there is their board, and healthy young women who work eight or nine hours a day have fine, large appetities. I believe this hostel costs, all told, about a hundred and thirty pounds a year."

"That seems pretty stiff," he commented.

"Well, not if you consider its advantages. Good air, good quarters, good society, and first-rate instruction. Of course there may be other places who accept lower fees, but they also may be cheap and nasty. Lizzie Brune's niece, Dora, is at Marklands—she has been there several terms, and loves it."

"Yes, I think I've heard Lizzie talk of the gardening girl, seems to me nonsense! What's that poetry about 'a garden of girls'?"

But Mimi went on quickly as if determined to retain control of the situation:

"Well, now, Uncle Michael, shall I sound Jean, or will you?"

"Oh, you, of course, but there's no hurry, no hurry."

"I'm not at all sure that the suggestion will come well from *me*."

"Why not? I'll leave it in your hands and you can see for yourself if Jean cottons to the idea. Otherwise of course, there is an end of the affair, and by and by you and I can take her down to Brighton for a week or two."

When the question was cautiously introduced to Jean she, so to speak, burst into a flame of enthusiasm; she liked the idea immensely, in fact, became uncommonly talkative and lively. She was acquainted with Mrs. Brune's niece Dora, and Dora had been full of praises of Marklands—she longed to join her.

Mrs. Brune's niece was invited to the Square, and the two girls chattered like magpies, compared notes, and Jean was fired with the ambition to be away and doing at once. This, of course, could not be managed off-hand. There

was correspondence, references, and prospectus, finally a visit to the hostel. However, within a month, Jean had collected her outfit, including the usual gardening overalls and boots—and full of high hopes and expectation, entered “The Marklands Ladies’ Horticultural College,” the first day of the summer term.

CHAPTER XVII

A GARDEN OF GIRLS

FOR more than twelve months Jean had been a pupil at Marklands, the well-known college for lady gardeners. Years previously, when the project was started by two clever cousins, Marklands was a derelict old place ; the park let for grazing, the gardens and grounds overgrown and desolate, the house empty and forsaken. The reason being that the owner was too impoverished to maintain such an expensive white elephant requiring at least fifteen gardeners and a large staff indoors. The enterprising Misses Sawyer, with imposing letters after their names, secured a long lease at a low figure, and promptly set about putting the premises in order. Tottering greenhouses were repaired, fruit trees were pruned, ground turned over ; in a surprisingly short time, peach and tomato houses were run up ; also business-like potting sheds, tool sheds, and forcing frames ; vines and fig trees found themselves resuscitated, lawns were mown, and the herbaceous border was restored to its former gay condition, and self-respect.

Within doors, papering, painting and white-washing were put in hand ; furniture was purchased suitable to the requirements of a simple working community. When all was complete, the Misses Sawyer distributed a prospectus which included an attractive view of Marklands—worked up the interest of their friends and indirectly their friends' friends and awaited results. The speculation proved to be a notable success—although the fees were stiff. The old Jacobean mansion was sunny and comfortable, the food

plain but plentiful and well served. There was a spacious refectory, a recreation hall, a lecture-room, and well-equipped dormitories. Discipline was strict, and visitors were not encouraged; the hours were not too long nor the work too strenuous, but punctuality and discipline were inflexibly enforced, and if a young woman did not learn to be an efficient gardener the fault was entirely her own. Although the house and park were apparently buried in the depths of the country, Marklands was but three miles from a main line station, and a large market town; thither cart-loads of fruit, vegetables, and flowers were daily despatched, also baskets of rare hot-house fruit, plants and exotics—according to the season. These with early vegetables, fared to London, and on the whole Marklands with, so to speak, "free labour," proved an unqualified success.

At Marklands the number of students was limited to thirty. Of these, some slept in an "annexe," and paid reduced fees, others luxuriated in the large, sunny bedrooms of the ancient manor. Jean what what was called an "inside," and Dora an "outside" pupil. The latter was now assistant—having qualified after three years study of vegetables, fruit, and flowers. She worked conscientiously, and liked her job; she was a tall, muscular young woman of four and twenty, fair as a Norwegian, with masses of splendid flaxen hair. Whatever task she undertook, that same she accomplished to the best of her ability. Reserved and deliberate in speech and manner, Miss Griffin was generally looked up to as a model pupil, and a rock of sense—her one relaxation was hockey, which she played with manly vigour.

When the day's work had concluded with a substantial supper, instead of dancing or playing games like others, she invariably settled herself down with an instructive book, say on "leaf moulds," "grape growing," or the rearing of early peas. Naturally she and Jean Dargan foregathered; she helped her friend with many useful hints, and smoothed the path of the new-comer. By this

time Jean was no longer a novice, but had been recently promoted from potatoes and celery to the herbaceous border and rock garden. She followed in Dora's footsteps, laboured heart and soul, looked far more robust than formerly and experienced a quickened interest in life—due to the unfolding of youth in an atmosphere of youth. Here, she found a change from the monotony of a suppressed existence; she had a brilliant colour, and unflagging spirits; the early, regular hours, breakfast at eight, dinner at one, tea at four-thirty—the dancing, tennis, and intercourse with young people of her own age, had changed the girl from a pale London lily to a lovely country rose—and somehow she created around her an atmosphere of helpful goodwill. Jean had another chum besides Dora, a certain Kitty Vaughan, a dark-eyed, delicate Londoner who, declaring that she “was afraid of ghosts,” insisted on sharing Jean's room. Kitty frankly detested gardening, early rising, also manual labour, and made no attempt to disguise the fact that she had been sent to Marklands as a sort of internment—in order to keep her under surveillance, and out of mischief. Kitty was a vivacious, irresponsible chatterbox, a shameless idler, and remarkably pretty; with charming, endearing ways, and devoted to Jean Dargan. Unfortunately Jean's two friends did not coalesce, but were as the poles apart, and yet she liked them both. Kitty, with her cheerful gabble, generous heart, and empty head; a gay and beautiful butterfly, bent on fluttering over the flowers of life, and tasting every experience. Dora, on the other hand, was slow, unimaginative, downright, and of unflagging industry. Dancing she utterly despised also dress, and appearances. Her magnificent hair was gathered into an uncompromising knot, and her hat invariably looked as if it had quarrelled with her head, and wanted to be off, and her serious blue eyes approved of the useful in preference to the beautiful. She saw more to admire in a fine show of tomatoes, than in a clump of dazzling sweet peas, and yet she could discourse very ably of the said

sweet peas—and was a sound authority on pruning roses.

Jean's room—large, low and panelled—overlooked the grounds and park; two small, white beds seemed out of place in an apartment appropriate to a four poster; the original bed had been disposed of by auction—after a residence of two hundred years! The window seats were deep, the fireplace a yawning cavity, an uneven oak floor was partly covered by cheap rugs, and the furniture was modern and plain.

It was Sunday, a sultry afternoon, and Jean was receiving a visit from Dora, who lay extended at full length on one of the small beds, eating chocolates from a pink box.

"Nyum!" she exclaimed appreciatively. "Where *did* you get them?"

"Kitty bestowed them—she has heaps—she is out to-day motoring."

"For all the work she does she might as well *stay* out," said Dora. "Her idea of gardening is picking rose leaves for potpourri, and gathering nectarines for personal consumption. I can't imagine *why* she came to Marklands, or why they keep her?"

"The Sawyers are but human—they suffer Kitty because she pays well. I believe she was sent here partly for her health, and partly as a punishment."

"Oh, yes, she makes no secret of *that* nor of anything else! What has she been doing?"

"Flirting."

"Well, that's no sin—though I hate it myself."

"Yes, a man might as well try to flirt with that wash-stand! Perhaps Kitty was amusing herself in a harmless way with a married man."

"What poisonous taste!"

"Perhaps his wife got hold of some letters—I only say *perhaps*?"

"Oh, and I can imagine that Miss Kitty lets herself go on paper, and the result is, she is at Marklands smoking,

writing to boys, playing cards, and slacking about. She shows her sense in one respect—she is fond of *you*!”

“I’m not so sure that that is a sign of sense! But I really believe she is.”

“And coaxes and palavers you to do most of her work.”

“I can’t do much, but I give her a hand now and then. Kitty is not strong. She sleeps badly and looks fragile—almost as if you could blow her away!”

“I only wish you could! She is a rank idler, and is a bad example; and sits manicuring her nails when she ought to be pruning roses. Most of the girls are like myself, here to *work*. I have, as you know, seven brothers and sisters younger than myself, and I intend to be independent and help the poor parents who are roasting out in India. Thank goodness, *I* am off their hands at last!”

“Of course, I was only joking about Kitty’s flirtations—just to see how much evil you’d believe, Dora! She is here for her health, and the open-air life; she racketed too much in town.”

“Yes, Kitty is here to play, and makes others discontented with her gabble about fine clothes, and motor-cars and balls. There is Vera Cope, sent entirely for her health and an out-door life instead of stuffing indoors playing cards and smoking. Alice and Maude Lane are at Marklands with a view to earning their bread, and Andrea Campbell—a true devotee of Mother Earth—but Kitty is leading them astray. I dislike her, and her ways more than I can say.”

“Oh, Dora, you are so straight-laced—though you do not wear stays;—the Lanes and Andrea get through lots of work, they dug all the new potatoes last week. Where are you going for Whitsuntide?”

“To Aunt Lizzie, I suppose. How I wish I might stop here. And you are booked to the Square, of course?”

“No, let me break it to you gently, that I am going home with Kitty.”

“What!” suddenly sitting erect.

"Yes, her aunt, Lady Heron, said she might bring a fellow-pupil, and she has done me the honour to select *me*!"

"I wonder you go to people you don't know—I have an impression they are a fast lot!"

"No, I know Mrs. Longfield, Lady Heron's mother, she is a charming old thing—I've seen her here. She lives with her daughter—and runs the house. Lady Heron cares for music and golf, and her own particular charities, and Mrs. Longfield delights in managing, and playing the hostess."

"You may not like her ladyship."

"I'm bound to like her better than Mimi, and any place is pleasanter than the Square in these days—you know that?"

"Yes, Aunt Lizzie says she rarely goes there, your Uncle Micky is so grumpy and odd, and they never have any company now—not even old Sir George. Poor Jean, what a time you had latterly—your right to an individual existence was never admitted by Mimi Vole. You are a thousand times happier down here. You seem a different creature—and are quite good-looking!"

"Thank you, Dora—same to you!"

"I hope this visit to Kitty's people won't turn your head, and make you crazy for gadding and flirting."

"Gadding—certainly not; but I warn you, that I shall flirt, if I get the chance—I hope I *shall*!"

"Bah! you don't know how, and if you cross-examine young men as was once your habit—they will flee from you like the plague."

"Thank you for the hint, my dear wise Dora, I shall be careful. Now come along," rising as she spoke, and proceeding to drag her friend up. "You have made hay of Kitty's bed—how furious she will be! The gong has gone for tea, so come along!"

* * * * *

Katherine Hermione—the only daughter of Sir Jervis

and Lady Vaughan—was adored and spoiled by her parents and three brothers. She was now twenty-two years of age, and since her fifth birthday—if not earlier—she had done precisely what she liked, said the first thing that came into her head, and went—to quote her own expression—“where she jolly well pleased!” Now and then, Lady Vaughan, who was somewhat somnolent and slow to move, would venture to remonstrate on some extravagance or escapade, but in her father’s sight, his pretty, dark-eyed Kitty could do no wrong, and her brothers were ever her defenders and champions. The result was, that Miss Katherine Hermione Vaughan, practically ran wild in Mayfair and other haunts. With a lively young brother for escort, she would dine at all sorts of queer little places in Soho, sup and dance at the Savoy, get smuggled into the green-room of a theatre, and return home, not *very* much earlier than the milk! Naturally, little Miss Vaughan got talked about. But times had changed since the days of her mother and grandmother; women, especially bright, eager young girls, were coming to their own! Kitty went on the river, or motoring, or golfing with boys—her brothers’ pals—and was known far and wide as a tireless chatterbox, and the most perfect of dancers. Smoking and lounging with her knees crossed, displaying a good deal of thin leg and ankle, she would describe most of her experiences as being “absolutely the limit.” Alas! too many late hours, too many cigarettes, too many fox-trots, had their effect, and Kitty was brought up before a stern, inflexible specialist, who ordered absolute rest and a life in the open air—as a result of this interview, Marklands had marked her for its own! She and Jean Dargan had arrived there the same day, travelled down in the same carriage, and had taken to one another on the spot. That is to say, Miss Vaughan, of Charles Street, Mayfair, had held out the sceptre to the pretty, rather shy little damsel from Bloomsbury, and Jean, not now accustomed to find girl friends, or indeed, anyone particularly eager

for her company, was only too thankful to accept the situation, and enter into an alliance with her fellow-pupil, as they lumbered up to Marklands, in the rickety station 'bus. The partnership was soon cemented; they were both beginners, both equally ignorant of horticulture, they shared the same room, and sat next to one another at meals. Kitty, who talked incessantly, appreciated a profoundly impressed listener, and Jean heard, with deepest interest, of a whirl of certain West-end circles, of amazing adventures, of jovial boy and girl dinners and dances, of strawberry teas in men's flats, of luncheons at Skindle's, of excursions and—for the benefit of others—alarms! Jean was also informed of a delightful ball, given by these roysterers, in the spacious London home of a certain maiden aunt—a ball which actually took place without her knowledge, during her absence at Bath. These bold mauraunders provided the band, flowers, supper, wines, and kept the fun going till five o'clock on a summer's morning, and then drove twice round the park in open taxis, in order to raise an appetite for breakfast! The elderly aunt did not hear of this outrageous liberty for a considerable time after it occurred, when a man who was calling, casually congratulated her on the splendid success of her grand ball, for young people only. "I am told there was scarcely a soul present over one and twenty!"

"Ball!" almost screamed the old lady. "I don't know what you are talking about. I never gave a ball in all my life—and never will."

"Well, at any rate, a ball took place in this very house, I can assure you; the whole place was illuminated. There was a fine string band, a grand supper, a hundred guests, I saw the whole thing as I was coming back from the club. The awning, carpet, and rows of waiting cabs, and I said to myself, that you had broken out in a new way; and wondered why you hadn't invited *me*, and kept the whole thing so dark?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking

about," protested the old lady. "I hope my mind is not giving way—or you are not trying to make a fool of an old friend?"

The elderly gentleman who was rather huffy rose to his feet, picked up his gloves, and said in his stiffest manner:

"No thanks—I won't wait for tea—if you do not believe what I say—you had better inquire from the servants!"

And straightway he stalked out of the room.

The Honourable Miss Featherstone immediately held a court of inquiry. The elderly butler was cross-examined, and given notice; then the lady's favourite nephew was summoned, and arraigned. He owned up—like a true gentleman.

"It was just a bit of a lark, Aunt Charlotte," he confessed. "And it did no harm! One or two fellows couldn't get their people to give a decent dance—a real downright dance—so we decided to have a sort of joint-stock ball, but were at our wits' end for a suitable house—and I offered them this."

"You offered them *this*!" repeated his relative, in a choked voice, as she glared at her handsome young nephew, now lounging in an opposite chair—supremely at his ease.

"I know it was a most frightful bit of cheek—liberty was no name for it!—but I thought you would never hear a word, for I squared old Brown, and thought 'ignorance would be bliss.' The ball would do *you* no harm—and gave a most delightful time to crowds of young people. Nothing was damaged, as you see. Everything was carefully moved out, and carefully put back by an experienced firm, and the one and only drawback to the whole thing was—that *you* were not here yourself to see the fun!"

Thus flattered, bamboozled, and talked over by this good-looking nephew—who happened to be a peer—the Honourable Miss Featherstone succumbed, and was presently appeased, so far, as to invite him to come

down to lunch. And here, partly stimulated by her relative's eloquency, and partly by a glass of sound port, the old lady hinted, that if he were a *very* good boy—some day or other—she might be inclined to give a dance on her own! It was generally conceded by the Ball Committee that the old girl had behaved uncommonly well.

This was one of the many adventures related to Jean, who listened with dancing eyes and broad smiles to Kitty's dramatic descriptions of the dress, company, and dances—of these latter she gave illustrations on their bedroom floor. Dancing was in her blood, and her nimble steps and whirling gyrations, fired her audience with envious amazement. Kitty delighted in opening wide the beautiful blue eyes of her new friend: a girl who had lived all her life in London, had never smoked a cigarette, danced a Tango, or had corresponded, or played about with boys; and described with eager gusto various experiences that were "absolutely the limit." Kitty talked not merely during the day, but encroached upon the hours dedicated to sleep, and kept her companion wide awake, listening to vividly described family history, to personal scrapes, motoring catastrophes, evanescent love affairs, losses at bridge, and on the race-course. At times she also submitted a keen analysis of the character of her friends. Amongst these, darling Aunt Sybil, Lady Heron, outshone all others. With respect to her, the sometimes cynical Kitty, who saw flaws and specks upon her dearest connections, became an enthusiast—Aunt Syb was so beautiful, so good—*really* good—so spotlessly upright, and so generous.

"She keeps a home at Dennington chiefly for Aunt Loo, her mother, and all the family. Once upon a time Aunt Loo, my grand-aunt, was most frightfully poor—Uncle Cecil was so reckless and extravagant, but she never would let any of her own people—that is my side of the house—hear of her troubles. However, when Aunt Syb married an enormously rich man, old enough

to be her grandfather—she made it all right for her relations!”

“Did she marry him for that?” inquired Jean. “Just to provide for *them*?”

“Perhaps?—I can’t tell you. It was before my day, although I was at the wedding, with crimped hair, and in a shamelessly short frock. However, Aunt Syb made the best of wives—even his people said so—and when he died, he left her a huge fortune and Dennington. I don’t think she cares for a big place; rooms so large you have to nestle in a corner if you want to be at all cosy, tribes of servants, and acres of gardens. She has a ducky little house in Bruton Street, delightfully furnished, according to her own taste, *no* early Victorian, thank you! When she is there, she moves in the musical set, has a box at the opera, goes to the best concerts, and lives the life she prefers. She works a lot among her special charities, and is a treasurer here, and on the committee there, has a girls’ home in the East End, a hostel for old people at Ealing; music and philanthropy are her two passions. She is simply an angel, without her harp.”

“I wonder, since she is so charming and so rich, that she doesn’t marry again?”

“Oh no, *never*!” replied Kitty, with unusual emphasis. “Somehow Aunt Syb doesn’t seem to care for men—she ought to have been a nun—she likes girls, and I feel sure she would like you.”

“Like *me*,” mumbled Jean, out of the darkness—the two young ladies happened to be in bed—“like me! rubbish, why should she like me?”

“For your delicious music, for one thing. If she had heard you this evening, playing Raff’s ‘Fileuse’ and ‘Song of the Sea,’ I believe she would have snatched you to her heart when you rose from the piano. I do love to listen to your fingers trickling over the notes like some clear limpid stream that has a voice—and a soul!”

"Kitty, I declare, you are becoming poetical—or perhaps you are talking in your sleep?"

"Not I, I never talk in my sleep!"

"But occasionally you snore—not aggressively. Not as my uncle does—and I tremble for the cartilage of his nose."

"How dare you say I snore, you horrid little pig-girl!"

"It's the truth. Tell me, does your saint-like Lady Sybil ever go to Dennington?"

"Oh, yes. It's by way of being her home—and the home of the whole family as well. It is mostly run and managed by Grand-aunt Loo, but now and then Aunt Syb appears, lavishes invitations, gives big parties, shoots and so on, scatters *largesse* among the charities and her poorer friends, stirs up the whole neighbourhood, and makes them all uncommonly pleased with themselves—and then she flies away again."

"Oh, does she? She seems to be a bit restless."

"Yes, Aunt Syb loves travelling."

"I don't wonder at that. How I should like to go about, and see the world."

"My dear, you have seen it—you seem to forget that you opened your blue eyes in China."

"Yes, so I did, but I left the Celestial Empire when I was two years old. Well, good-night, Kit, it's long past twelve o'clock, and if I did open my blue eyes in China—I'm going to close them *now*."

CHAPTER XVIII

A MEETING

ON a certain sultry afternoon in June the sun glared down upon Marklands, and the red brick garden walls, against which the garden-girls' bright blue overalls struck a sharply contrasting note, and challenged the envy of tall delphiniums. It was the month of roses, and here were roses in profusion, a magnificent show, not only in beds and borders, but in brave masses that draped walls, and covered like a veil the rustic pergolas and fences. We behold not only our old friends, "Dorothy Perkins" and "Hiawatha," but "Mrs. W. J. Grant" and the lemon-coloured "Gloire Lyonnaise," dwarf "Noisette," hybrid, and tea, were all worthily represented—the air was heavy with their perfume, mingled with that of delicious beds of giant mignonette. Bees and butterflies were as busy in their way as any of the fair girl-gardeners, and the unpopular, but delicate white butterfly, was continually in evidence. Marklands was looking its best, and at this season the gardens had many visitors; neighbours brought their guests to inspect what was one of the local sights, and these were occasionally entertained to tea by the ladies Sawyer, in their own special charming quarters.

Jean, despite the heat, was an unflagging worker; with her sleeves tucked up, her hat pulled well over her eyes, she was wheeling a barrow of peat-mould towards the potting sheds, and in the "lavender walk" encountered a group of visitors, who stood aside, and made room for her to pass.

These included two ladies, an elderly man wearing a

white hat, idle Kitty, who by rights should have been staking peas—and—yes! Vernon Harlow. So he had come back! She gripped the handles of the barrow very firmly, and continued steadily on her way. Her heart was beating unusually fast, but then the day was warm and her load was heavy. All in a moment she heard a quick step, and a voice close to her.

"Miss Dargan!" said Harlow, snatching off his hat and speaking a little breathlessly. "This *is* a surprise, fancy meeting you here!"

"And you?"

"I'm home—obvious fact, eh? I say, you must allow me to wheel that barrow?"

"Certainly not," she answered with a laugh. "I might be dismissed for neglecting my work. This is my job."

"Well, I don't call it a girl's job," he urged, walking beside her. "It must be fairly heavy."

When she had reached her goal and upset the load, he said:

"I've often thought of you, and wondered if you were furious about my note? I know it was unpardonable cheek asking you to meet me. I waited for hours and hours, and I hadn't even 'Uncle' to keep me company."

"I'm sorry, but we left for London that day."

"Otherwise—would you have come?"

"I'm not sure," now colouring vividly. "No, I think not."

"Well, that's plain speaking, at any rate! And now see how times have changed. You are a working girl and I'm an idler."

"Are you—not really?"

"I'm home, there's been a general armistice in our family. The pater has been ill and had a lot of worry, and so he sent for me. I'm jolly glad to be back at the old place."

"So I should think."

"Yes, I'm in charge now and fairly busy. By the way

'Uncle' is still going strong, and has deserted the Arms—he's so fat, I shall have to get him a perambulator!"

"And what about the great invention?"

"Oh, it's progressing. I have still one foot in the States. You may yet hear of the Welland-Harlow bi-plane flying to Europe. Why, if I may presume to ask, are you here, Miss Dargan?"

"For various reasons. One is, that my cousin Mimi does not appreciate my society and she told uncle I should be in the country for my health's sake; for this I am truly grateful, for I love gardening and flowers."

"And when your time here is up, what happens next?"

"I suppose I shall return to Uncle Michael. Maybe I shall again be potted out! Or I might get a job in Bedford Square," and she laughed. "I'm very handy with a scuffle and lawn mover!"

"No, no, come down to us and do landscape at Harlow! I say, why does your cousin dislike you?"

"I'm not sure that dislike is the right word. She wishes to have the house and uncle to herself."

"Is the house so small? I don't know those parts."

"Sixteen bedrooms—and mostly empty. At the end of my term she may find some other way to dispose of me."

"I'm sure that won't be difficult!"

"Hullo, Vernon!" said Kitty, suddenly appearing round the corner. "Why are you paying compliments? And Jean, why are you idling? How did you two scrape acquaintance?"

"Oh, we met ages ago—and not in a crowd," was Vernon's ready reply.

"Jean is coming to Dennington for Whitsuntide."

"Then I shall have the pleasure of seeing you. I'm staying with cousins in the neighbourhood."

"And they are just off—I was sent to fetch you, my dear boy," and hooking her arm in his, Kitty, the irresistible, led him away.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE ROSE GARDEN

DENNINGTON, to which Jean had been invited for Whitsuntide, was an ugly, flat-faced mansion, only redeemed from the suspicion of being the County Asylum, by a lofty-pillared portico. The house, which had been entirely rebuilt, was surrounded by well-kept grounds, and an imposing park—approached by no less than three pretentious entrance-gates, heavily ornamented with the Heron coats of arms. The property had been bought by the first and last Lord Heron—an enormously wealthy iron master—and furnished to suit the taste of his first consort. The second Lady Heron was a rich and independent widow, who contemplating the scene from her door-step could truthfully say: “I am monarch of all I survey! my right there is none to dispute!”

Kitty and her friend arrived at tea-time, and were immediately ushered into an immense drawing-room—equally suitable for balls or lectures—furnished with solid and costly chairs, sofas, mirrors and cabinets of the Victorian Age. Everything wore a boastful air, and seemed to say: “Behold me. I cost so much—I am the very best and most expensive article that can be made.” The net result of this vast outlay, was of surprising ugliness and comfort. Apparently the present Lady Heron had left things as they were arranged by her predecessor—merely introducing a few photographs, masses of flowers, screens, and picturesque lampshades; but ruthlessly banishing bead mats, wax figures, and various Berlin-wool atrocities. The apartment

seemed half full of a lively and congenial company when the two girls entered. There was Mrs. Longfield, her grey hair beautifully dressed, dispensing cups of tea and iced coffee, with the assistance of the Rector and his son—a long-legged youth from Osborne. Close to her mother—but giving no help—sat Daisy Lane, Mrs. Longfield's pretty daughter, lately home from India. Her husband was also present, devouring tomato sandwiches—a bronzed, good-looking officer, in the Bengal Cavalry. There was Captain Longfield, a weather-beaten young man on leave from Nigeria—at present engaged in chaffing the Rector's youngest daughter. Further away a group of men were talking cricket. These included Vernon Harlow and Jimmy Vaughan—Kitty's brother, with whom he had been in the same house at Eton. Several pretty girls were also present, and one or two of the officers from the neighbouring Dépôt; but on the whole, the gathering gave one more or less the impression of a family party.

Strange to say, Lady Heron was not present to receive her guests—she had been detained in London, where she was one of the patronesses of a great charity bazaar—and had missed her train. However, it was expected that she would turn up in ample time for dinner; meanwhile her mother proved a most effective representative.

After tea, tennis was suggested. The evening succeeding a sultry day was cool and tempting, and everyone trooped forth, including the deputy hostess, in a jaunty garden hat.

"I'm afraid the sets are made up," said Harlow, who had purposely loitered with Jean. "We can cut in later. What do you say to a turn in the celebrated rose garden—it takes the cake—your show isn't in it! Lady Heron spends tons of money on flowers."

"I confess I should like to inspect this wonderful rosery—although I am pretty confident that it cannot compete with Marklands."

"Oh, that's only your *esprit de corps* and vanity."

"Do you consider yourself a qualified judge of roses?"

"To be truthful, *no*. I go by the general effect—lots of crowd and colour. I'm more at home, buzzing up and down in an aeroplane, or working out mechanical designs."

"And you have returned for good?"

"Yes, for good—or bad. With regular trips to the States. I'm awfully keen about my job out there, and my good partners—though my father bars both the Wellands—and the factory. He and I have made it it up, and are the best of friends."

"I'm glad of that!" and her thoughts flew to the chorus lady.

"Some time ago my brother George landed a bomb on the family roof; he married and, in my parents' opinion, it was all the same as if he had cut his throat. George was always so silent and reserved—'consume my own smoke' sort of thing—just the kind a lively, gabbling little minx would rope in. So the match was a frightful shock—the Pater always thought so much of George. I don't say it was this—but he had a stroke, and a long bout of illness, which aged him a good deal; then he missed my mother, and he missed his former robust health and activity; he seemed, as he told me himself, to have suddenly broken up; so he cabled out, and offered me the olive branch, which I took of course—and also the next boat. After nearly three years, we were glad to meet—in spite of our stormy parting."

"I suppose it was a serious quarrel?"

"Serious? You can bet your bottom dollar! Money affairs are always the mischief, and my father, though wealthy, abhors extra calls on his purse. Everything has to be just so much—and *no* more—he keeps his accounts to the halfpenny. So when I went and asked for the small matter of five thousand pounds——" he paused.

"Five thousand pounds!" echoed Jean.

"Yes. I leave the rest to your imagination! By the

way, this is the rose garden, and we are 'cutting' the best roses!"

The Dennington rose garden offered a fair sight, and delicious fragrance—even in the prejudiced opinion of a pupil from Marklands. Low, bushy tea-roses of rare variety grew in rows at either side of a long gravel walk; behind the roses were others of the climbing variety, clustering about rustic posts, and covering connecting chains. Here and there, the walk was crossed by an archway, and at the end was an inviting seat, sheltered by an elaborate pergola. It was a case of "roses, roses all the way," and this slim, graceful girl, in her white gown, had herself a flower-like charm.

"A fine show, is it not?" said Harlow, with the complacency of a proprietor.

"Yes, and those 'American Pillars' are wonderful—but I don't see anything *new*. 'Caroline Testout' is an old friend, so is 'Mrs. John Laing,' but I admit she is superb; so is this specimen of 'Madame Ravary.' Some of the tea-roses are rather disappointing. I fancy the soil is too chalky. Now please tell me more about the five thousand pounds?"

"It was not for myself," said Harlow. "That was the worst—and the best of it. A schoolfellow of mine, who raced a bit, got into frightful difficulties; he was bound to pay a money-lender a sum on a certain day, or be smashed, and hounded off the turf. He wanted a loan for a couple of months—just to tide over the crisis, when he had money coming in, so I agreed to that very simple civility—and backed his bill! It was a thumping sum—but merely, so the fellow swore, a matter of form. Well, the day of reckoning came round at express speed, and the money lender descended upon *me*. Wasn't it crushing bad luck? My friend had fled the country, and left me to face the music—that is to say, my father. It was a case of the big drum!"

"Well yes, I'm not surprised at that."

"I shall always hate the smoking-room in Eton Square

with its grinning Japanese devils on the mantelpiece, looking and listening for all they were worth! It was there my father and I met and had our interview."

"Then he was very angry?"

Jean, who had been pacing slowly, came to a halt, and looked at her companion, with expectant interest.

"He was almost beside himself—raving mad—he told me that I was—well, it's no matter now—and I lost my temper, and said more than was wise. As the upshot of the interview I was branded a good-for-nothing, idle spendthrift, and told to clear out, and earn my own living. The £5,000 would be paid—I remember that this promise nearly choked the pater—for the sake of the family name—but not a penny would I receive—to value money, I must *earn* it."

"And you have done that?" said Jean, stooping to sniff an exquisite "Irish Elegance."

"Yes, I've made quite a nice little pile. I get a liberal allowance, and what is more, my runaway school-fellow has actually paid up, and my parent is immensely consoled. The fellow is making a fortune in Peru, and I expect he has some sort of conscience, and it tweaked him!"

"And do you and your father live at Harlow?"

"Yes, and I run the place. My Aunt Dorothea looks after the house. My father has taken up the gardens, badly neglected—'nothing done, and that done badly'—sort of thing.—We could do with some lady help."

"Yes, I dare say—I suppose your sister-in-law——"

"Oh lord, don't mention her! The bare idea of Mrs. George at Harlow with her scent, make-up, and cigarettes, her language and her boys, nearly put an end to the pater. When she called to see him in London, there was another painful interview in the smoking-room. To make a disagreeable story short, he and George, have come to an amicable arrangement—and the entail has been broken—in my favour."

"You seem to have had quite a run of luck of late?"

"I have indeed—especially since the day before yesterday," he answered with prompt significance.

Jean coloured warmly, twisted off a dead rose, and asked with a nonchalant air :

"Is this your first visit to these parts ?"

"No, my mother's cousins—the Ladies Mostyn—have a nice little place in the neighbourhood, and this is my second visit. Kitty Vaughan is an old friend—I knew her in London, as a flapper. Roger was at Sandhurst with me; and now, what about these roses?" coming to a standstill. "What is the name of that lovely pink?"

"'Coralinna'—but it has little perfume."

"And the pale yellowish pink that hits you straight in the eye?"

"'The Daily Mail.'"

"Not really—bar chaff! And the bright yellow?"

"'Rayon d'Or.'"

"I see you do know your business, and I am filled with envious respect. I am hoping you will offer me a button-hole?"

"And make you a receiver of stolen goods! No, like your friend in Peru, I too, have a conscience!"

"Well, I've none with regard to flowers," and suddenly he produced a knife—and cut an exquisite bloom.

"A button-hole for *you*. Come, don't throw it away and lacerate my feelings."

As Jean held the glorious rose in irresolute fingers, he asked :

"What leave have you?"

"Till Monday week."

"Oh, that's all right," he hesitated and then exclaimed: "Here are people swarming in. If you'd like some tennis, I expect the courts are temporarily clear—and now is our time!"

CHAPTER XX

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE WHO FORGOT

THE company, fifteen in all, were assembled in the drawing-room awaiting their hostess, and the announcement of dinner; and Mrs. Longfield, stately in purple satin, and *point d'Alençon*, was circulating among the guests, making little speeches and excuses for her daughter's non-appearance. Harlow, who was standing by Jean, remarked:

"I think Mrs. Longfield would be such a splendid woman for opening bazaars and sports, and lectures, saying just the right thing at the right moment—a sort of professional chair-woman. She thoroughly enjoys that sort of thing, and lots of people would be only too thankful to pay her handsomely to represent them. Observe her soothing Mrs. Blaxland, who has got her feathers up."

"Yes, Grannie enjoys the limelight—she would love to head a big procession down Piccadilly," said Kitty, who had joined her friend. "Aunt Syb is late—we often have to give her half an hour's grace. She has so many irons in the fire—in the way of good works—a hospital for sick children in Poplar—an old woman's hostel at Ealing——"

At this moment the door opened, and a tall, dark, and very graceful woman trailed into the room. To Jean's amazement and delight, she instantly recognised Mrs. Alsager. There was no mistaking the sweeping gait, those haunting eyes, the long chain of pearls. Mrs. Alsager, who appeared to be well known to every one, distributed

a word here and there, as she passed up the room, till finally she came face to face with a stranger who with rising colour and a radiant smile, rose and advanced with outstretched hand, saying :

"Oh, Mrs. Alsager—this is an unexpected pleasure !"

Mrs. Alsager started, and stood momentarily transfixed ; her face assumed a waxen hue, her splendid eyes were fixed on Jean in a sort of cataleptic stare ; but in an instant she had recovered her self-possession, and said in an icy voice :

"Pleasure—did you say ? But my name is Heron. I don't think," surveying Jean with a stony expression, "that we have ever met before—you have mistaken me for some one else !"

No, there was no mistake ; the face, the deep voice, the air—was that of the lady who had shared the sitting-room at the "Harlow Arms." But now her look was so frozen, her carriage so haughty, that poor Jean felt utterly humiliated, and daunted ; and murmuring an apology, slipped back into her place.

Mrs. Alsager and Lady Heron were one and the same ! What did it mean ? As her hostess moved on, and Jean endeavoured to cool her blazing cheeks, Harlow said :

"Her ladyship and you seem to have had a misunderstanding ! As the Irishman said, 'It was neither of us.' You were previously acquainted ?"

"I've never seen Lady Heron till now," replied Jean with her eyes on the carpet.

"Well, you have met a good sort ! the head and front of no end of charities. In the opinion of her friends she wears a crown, or nimbus. I must say her manner was a trifle odd—for she is generally so gracious—though some people do say, that with all her affability—she is really and truly most awfully *shy* !"

"Shy," repeated Jean with an hysterical laugh. "She has made *me* feel awfully shy !"

"Ah, here is dinner, or rather the butler. I am to have the honour of taking you in."

The dinner table presented a brilliant appearance, the polished mahogany set off the fine old silver and glass, and masses of exquisite roses were reflected in its dark surface. The assembled guests proved to be a congenial and merry party, all with the exception of the usually animated Jean. Her companion did his utmost to raise her spirits, but soon discovered that the load that weighed upon them was beyond his strength. Ever since she had accosted Lady Heron, Miss Dargan appeared to be a changed girl, to have lost the use of her tongue—the sunny radiance of her expression was dimmed.

Meanwhile he rattled on, and talked about America, and his experiences, his friends, his projects, and his hopes in connection with the wonderful new plane. After this subject was exhausted, he discoursed on books.

"I suppose you have no time for novels at the hostel?"

"Not much. Have you read anything good lately?"

"No—we have a big library in London, started by a bookworm ancestor—a collector. I went to look for something to read the other evening, and I give you my word there was nothing under a hundred years old—some much older. My father is old-fashioned—he says why buy books, when we have thousands in the house!"

"And they are very valuable, of course?"

"I believe so. Stacks of mouldy old first editions, some published as far back as sixteen hundred and two. I rooted out a couple on chance, and got hold of Baxter's 'Enquiry into the State of the Human Soul.' That was one; another, 'A Discourse on the Great Plague.' Lively reading for a wet afternoon! I say," pausing, "Won't you have some strawberries?" No! Why, you've eaten *no* dinner. I'm afraid you have a headache?"

"Only—a very little one."

"And must find me and my jabber a nuisance?"

"No, no, only I feel so stupid—what with two sets of strenuous tennis, meeting so many strangers, and being

totally unaccustomed to society—I'm too dull for words!"

"Don't say that—I'm jolly well certain you couldn't be dull if you tried."

"Well, then, compare Kitty opposite, and myself."

"Oh—Kitty! Once *she* starts, she's like a Gatling-gun!"

"She has got to stop *now*," said Jean, "for Lady Heron has caught Mrs. Blaxland's eye—and we depart."

* * * * *

It was a miserably unhappy and undecided Jean, who sat before her dressing-table, staring into her own face, and brushing out the soft thick hair, which covered her like a mantle.

Lady Heron had not opened her lips to her all the evening, and once, when their eyes met, had pointedly turned her head away. How could she remain under a roof where her hostess ignored her, and plainly allowed her to feel that she was unwelcome? She must invent some excuse, and return to the Square immediately—no, better still, fly to Aunt Henny—yes, to-morrow. She had taken some steps towards departure, already various belongings had been collected, and a half-written letter lay on the open blotter. Suddenly there came a sharp imperative knock at her door, and in another moment Jean found herself face to face with Lady Heron.

"My dear," she began, as she quickly approached. "I don't know how I am to *begin* to talk to you."

Jean rose, and put down her hair brush, and for a moment they eyed one another in dead silence.

"I told you a lie, of course!" continued the elder lady, breathlessly. "You knew me as Mrs. Alsager. You have looked into my double life. Oh, to think of a child like *you*, holding, as far as I'm concerned, my fate in your hands—my good name—my very existence! If my mother and friends were to know what you have seen—I think—I should die!"

She paused, and surveyed Jean with tragic eyes.

"I don't in the least understand what you mean?" faltered the girl in a low voice.

"No, but I'm here expressly to explain—everything! Do let us sit down," and taking Jean's arm, she led her to a sofa. "I'm about to tell you—who know part—the whole story."

Jean, restrained by an unaccountable shrinking—and filled with apprehension as to what might be disclosed—flung back her tawny mane, and clasped her trembling hands upon her knees.

"You will respect my confidence?"

"Of course," assented Jean in a whisper.

"Well, then, listen. When I was two years younger than you are *now*, Charlie Alsager fell madly in love with me—and it was mutual. We lived within two miles, and met almost daily, when he was on leave. My father, who was agent to his uncle Colonel Alsager, was hampered with debts, and a growing-up family, and everyone hooted our love affair, and looked on it as a mere joke—for we had not a shilling between us. It was hopeless from the first—of course, I need not tell you that this made no difference to our feelings. Then Charlie's regiment went to India, and I was heart-broken—so was he. In my case, I had a long illness, in which I hoped, and prayed, to die—for since Charlie had gone, what had I to live for? He had a stiff hill campaign to divert his thoughts—I had nothing. After a time, we ceased to correspond—some one held up our letters—and, indeed, so hopeless was the outlook—that silence was best. Then a well-to-do aunt, a widow—invited me to live with her in London, as companion, and protégée. She brought me out in the world, and so to speak, placed me on the market! I had a fine, voice—and was considered handsome. Lord Heron, an oldish man, came often to Rutland Gate. I naturally supposed him to be my aunt's admirer—but I was soon undeceived—to my horror, I discovered that he wished to marry *me*! For two solid years I held out against him; and resisted great pressure from my family; then

my father died, leaving his affairs in frightful confusion, and my mother and sisters all but penniless. My young brothers too, just starting in life, wanted assistance. My aunt preached to me daily, and impressed on me that I had but to utter *one* word—the simple word ‘Yes,’ to make every one happy—meanwhile there was my mother in cheap lodgings, my sisters qualifying as typists, my brothers’ hopes broken—and how *could* I hold out?”

“I—suppose not.”

“With one consent they all declared it was a case of the cruellest selfishness, so in the end I accepted Lord Heron. He was most kind and generous—but thirty-eight years older than I was, and immovably fixed in his habits and opinions. My brothers were well started, and my mother received a handsome allowance. After a year, Charles Alsager returned home, engaged to a pretty woman he had met on board ship. They were married, and we were present at the wedding, a grand affair—which took place in London. Within six weeks the bride went out of her mind, and has been a hopeless lunatic ever since. She imagines she is the Queen of the Cannibal Islands, and refuses to wear clothes. It is a case of suicidal mania, too, poor soul; she has attempted her life on several occasions.”

“How dreadful!” murmured Jean.

“Yes, she has been insane for ten years. After a long, long, wasting illness—my old husband died. I hope and believe I was a comfort and help to him. I’m a fairly good nurse, and he loved my songs and my company, and I think I may say—*myself*. Here am I, both wealthy and free—whilst Charles Alsager, who had never put me out of his heart, is bound to this unfortunate maniac. Oh, *what* a law!” now rising and beginning to pace the room. “What a cruel law, that chains a living man to a mental corpse! Charlie’s uncle left him the family property, to the indignation of other kin—who declared that it was because Charles played such a good game of golf. However, here we were, neighbours once more—

just as in those old boy and girl days—when our hearts were young! We met out hunting and playing golf, and so on—and this continued for some time—the flame was smouldering—temptation always whispering. *You*,” pausing before the crouching figure, “do not know what *real* love means. You have lived among elderly people—your eyes are closed to the most vital, most intoxicating, most absorbing of experiences. In spite of your red hair—your temperament is cool—not like mine! I had an Italian grandmother!” She turned about, and walked to the door, then evidently changed her mind, and came back—and standing directly in front of Jean, speaking with overpowering emotion, she said: “Charlie and I realised that our best days were ebbing away—life was passing—finally we surrendered—flouted the law and went on a honeymoon!”

Jean coloured deeply—her very ears were red!

“Yes, dear child, you are blushing for me, I can see. Not a soul was, or is—in our secret, except yourself. The chauffeur has never been here; we engage him, or another stranger, in London, or Paris. I was supposed to be on the Italian Lakes—Charles shooting in Scotland. We were both—elsewhere. These trips are at long intervals—they just keep our heads above the black waters of despair—and harm no living creature. Most people in my little world respect me. I do believe they speak of me as a *good* woman, and an example! Oh,” covering her face with her hands, she sobbed out, “if they only *knew*!” Then raising her head, and again confronting Jean, she went on, “I am patroness of crèches and treasurer of maternity institutions, the principal of a home for fallen women. Now little Jean Dargan—you are shocked and speechless!”

“No, no,” she protested, drawing a long breath. “Not so much—er—er—surprised—as—as startled. I am truly sorry for you.”

“Thank you, you dear little innocent lamb! I never guessed, when I told Kitty to bring a friend, that the

friend would turn out to be some one from the ' Harlow Arms ' ! When I caught sight of you to-night I felt as if I had been turned to stone ! ”

“ I could see that,” assented Jean, with a tremulous smile.

“ Yes, my dear, and I had to explain *all* to you before I slept—if I do sleep—though it was horrible to come with such a tale to a young and innocent girl. Now you know all about Sybil Alsager—I hope you will not detest Lady Heron ! ”

“ No, not if she is like Mrs. Alsager.”

“ She is—so then it's a bargain ! Is it possible,” looking round, “ that you were packing ? ”

“ Yes ; how could I remain when you would not speak to me ? ”

“ Now I *have* spoken—perhaps you will feel that it is your duty to fly ? ”

“ No, indeed—I was enjoying my visit so much——”

“ Until I appeared,” supplemented her hostess. “ Now you must enjoy it more than ever. I see you know Vernon Harlow ? ”

“ Not very well.”

“ Oh, that will soon be mended—he is a dear fellow. I've only come across him recently—his old cousins adore him. His father is one of those feudal despots, who rule their family with a blunderbuss, expects his grown-up sons to rise, when he enters the room, and to be in bed and asleep by ten o'clock. Mrs. Harlow was by all accounts a darling—she lived in her garden—and among the poor. Vernon was *her* boy.” A pause, and she added, “ I think he will be *your* boy—some day, if you care to have him ? ”

“ Oh, Mrs. Alsager—I mean Lady Heron ! ”

“ For heaven's sake, don't make that blunder downstairs ! ”

“ No, no, but Mr. Harlow is—is only a very slight acquaintance.”

“ May I ask how long you have known him ? ”

Jean hesitated, and then reluctantly replied, "some years."

"Oh, and you call that a slight acquaintance!" She paused expressively, and then gave a low laugh.

"Where is Colonel Alsager?" inquired Jean in a half whisper.

"Fishing in Scotland, thank goodness. Had he been here this evening, he would have lost his head! Well, perhaps some day we may be married, and you shall come and stay with Colonel and Mrs. Alsager. My mother shall reign here—but all this is sheer castle-building!—and oh, we have built so many castles. On several occasions Charlie's lawful wife has been on the point of death, and he has been summoned in haste, but she has an iron constitution, and rallies in an incredible fashion. If I were really Mrs. Alsager, I'd have nothing more to live for, but I often think that that miserable, naked maniac, will survive us both! Ah, there is twelve o'clock striking, and my poor maid is still waiting up. Good-night, my dear little startled Jean," embracing her warmly as she spoke. "*You* must not desert me—whatever happens!" and with an impressive nod, she was gone.

CHAPTER XXI

LADY HERON'S STORY

AFTER her sensational interview with Lady Heron, Jean went to bed, but not to sleep—on the contrary, she passed what is commonly known as a “bad night”—so feverish, restless, and miserable was she—tossing from side to side, and turning her pillow—the condition of her mind was abnormal and overstrained—and finding neither peace for her brain, nor repose for her body.

“Why,” she asked herself, “should she—of all people—have stumbled into the secret of the Alsagers’ life—what was there about her to invite the confidence of comparative strangers, such as Lady Heron, and Vernon Harlow?” She was compelled to keep silence respecting her first meeting with him, and Kitty was persistently teasing, and tiresomely inquisitive, as to when and how she had made his acquaintance? But this difficulty was as nothing, in comparison to the tale which had been poured into her ear this evening. To think of Kitty’s adored Aunt Sybil, the object of her worship, and with respect to whose perfections, she had frequently bored her companion—to think of this model of all that was good, being in reality a lady with a double life, who went off on honeymoons, with a married man—pretending to be his lawful wife! At home, by all accounts, a beloved mistress, relative and friend, open-handed, charitable, unselfish, a moral and a shining landmark—in short, everything that a good woman should be. Separated from her home surroundings, what a different personality! Enjoying pleasure, luxury—and a man’s absolute devotion, with an air of unqualified satisfaction.

Jean felt her face burn against the cool, linen pillow-case, and experienced a twinge of guilt, as she recalled her share—as third party—in certain romantic walks, and exhilarating motor drives. She instinctively shrank from meeting Lady Heron in the morning—and supposing, in a moment of nervous forgetfulness, she were to address her as *Mrs. Alsager*! What then? If she could only carry out her first intention of running off to Aunt Henny—but there were lions in the path.

Aunt Henny, delighted to hear of her invitation to Dennington, had ordered from London, a pretty new evening frock, and a smart hat—whereby to set off her favourite niece! What would Aunt Henny say, or think, if she were to present herself at the cottage after a visit to Dennington of less than twenty-four hours, and absolutely refuse all explanations? Then as to the Square, that door of escape was closed, for Uncle Micky and Mimi were enjoying a well-earned holiday in the Isle of Wight. Oh, if she could only effect a retreat with ease and propriety? But a retreat was hopeless, and the Dennington invitation had yet ten long days to run!

Two brilliant mental pictures had been, so to speak, defaced—Mrs Alsager's portrait—a memory of grace, and charm—must now be turned to the wall, for Lady Heron, Kitty's saintly aunt, her object of adoration and veneration, was in plain words, "no better than she should be." What an awakening for a simple little girl, brought up in a prim and narrow environment! Uncle Micky was rigidly conventional, and Mimi, whatever her faults might be—was proper, as an early Victorian old maid! How impossible it seemed to think of Mimi as a married woman! There was yet another obstacle in the way of her escape. If she had made plausible excuses, and deserted the party—what was she to say to Kitty? Kitty the slave of an insatiable and piercing curiosity? Already she was teasing Jean respecting her acquaintance with Vernon Harlow! Questions which called up all Jean's naturally quick intelligence to parry!

Towards morning, just as the birds were beginning to stir, Jean fell into a sound sleep, from which she never moved till the chink of a tea-tray at her bedside caused her to open her eyes. At breakfast, to an accustomed eye, Miss Dargan seemed unusually pale and silent, but the assembled strangers supposed this to be her normal breakfast aspect. No doubt she would cheer up as the day wore on! But Lady Heron, from behind the great silver tea-urn, speculated on an altered Jean—and one who seemed purposely to avoid her eye.

It was Sunday morning; the parish church stood just outside the entrance gates, and Mrs. Longfield, in a wonderful mauve toilette, herded her family and her daughter's guests across the park, in response to a peal of bells. But Jean was not among the little flock—she was detained by Lady Heron, who took her arm with a confidential gesture, and lagged far in the rear of the party. She did not allude to their strange interview of the previous night, her intention evidently was to set the girl at her ease, and make her feel at home. She talked hurriedly, in quick, jerky sentences, and Jean could occasionally feel that the hand that held her arm was trembling violently.

"How my dear old mother enjoys all this!" she exclaimed, with a nod towards Mrs. Longfield, and her flock. "How thankful I am that she should have some pleasure towards the end of her life—for she had much trouble for many years."

"Had she?" murmured Jean—at a loss as to how she could sympathise.

"Yes, first and last, it was *money*—the root of all evil! Mother comes of a good old family, very proud, and exclusive. My father was a delightful, popular young man, and in spite of warnings as to his reckless extravagances, she married him—and it was a case of, 'I told you so'! Father had a good land agency, but I am afraid he thought it was merely a billet for hunting and shooting; he had no head for figures—but he was a

first-rate shot. For the first few years all went pretty well, then came a well-filled nursery, with heavy extra expenses, but father still remained optimistic, open-handed, the soul of hospitality, bringing home men to lunch or dinner, inviting people to stay, and giving them of the best. This was hard on a house keeper, with bills to meet, and many pairs of boots and shoes to buy. But my mother played her part splendidly, and kept a bold front—especially for her own family. Then came evil days, with money lenders, and their troubles. But father never seemed to mind—or feel a care. ‘Everything will come out all right,’ he assured my mother, ‘and of course, the boys must be sent to good schools.’ He was obliged to have a car to inspect the estate, a couple of clerks to see to the books, and he went about apparently as prosperous as ever. It was, and is always, the women who in such cases are obliged to pinch, and pay the price. And mother, who was so accomplished and fond of society, took to cooking, patching, slaving, trying to hide our difficulties, and to ‘carry on,’ in spite of the terrible truth—even now her poor dear hands are all worn and scarred from sheer hard work. Neighbours who called, and came to tea or lunch, little guessed how much of the meal had been prepared by the hostess; she was always neatly dressed, had lots of flowers about the room, and all the appointments spick and span—being much too proud to reveal her poverty—but like the fox hidden by the Spartan youth, poverty ‘ate into her very vitals.’ The boys were at school, my sisters were in the school-room, I was the eldest of the family, and gave what help I could, till Aunt Fanny adopted me, and I was obliged to leave poor mother to her fate. Then father had a long illness and died—cheerful, poor man, to the last. I don’t believe he realised that he was leaving us all but beggars. The estate accounts were in a shocking condition. However, old Colonel Alsager was most generous and forbearing, and eventually everything was smoothed out. Now, after an interval of thirty-five years mother has

returned to the life to which she was accustomed, is surrounded by her own belongings, and supremely happy ! ”

“ Yes, I must say she looks it. ”

“ The family have turned out well, in spite of such a scrambling upbringing—one boy is in the Army—one in the Indian Civil—and my younger sisters are satisfactorily married. ”

“ And Kitty ? ” said Jean, in a puzzled tone, “ is she really your niece ? ”

“ No, Kitty’s mother, Lady Vaughan, is mother’s niece, and though she calls me aunt—we are really cousins. Kitty is a darling, but most dreadfully spoilt ! A wild, irresponsible creature, like a beautiful butterfly, flitting about in the sunshine. Her scrapes have been hair-raising—her adventures of the most audacious description, and to hear her relate these, is like listening to a piquant little French play ! However, there’s not a ha’p’orth of harm in the girl, and later on she will steady down, or her energies will take another form. Kitty is of the class that keeps the world moving ! Marklands will do her good, and so will you. ”

Jean murmured something unintelligible.

Lady Heron then went on. “ Kitty’s mother is a rather lethargic chaperon, and hands the girl over to her brothers—she smokes too many cigarettes, and knows too many boys—with whom she corresponds and whom she calls by their Christian names. This is quite the usual thing now, I believe, but I don’t think your Aunt Henny would smile on such a custom, eh ? ”

“ No, indeed, Aunt Henny is decidedly straightlaced, she likes to read romantic love stories—but she doesn’t care to be brought in touch with them in real life. ”

“ Yes, I remember she was rather prim ; she didn’t approve of cigarettes, or slang, or winking. I think if any of her friends were to make a moral lapse, she would thrust them out of her life, and consign them to what was their proper fate—the region of outer darkness—to

say nothing of the gnashing of teeth! Now, if she were to know about *me*——”

Lady Heron paused significantly, and tightened her grasp on Jean's arm. After an expressive silence, she said: “I do hope you will enjoy your holiday here, my dear child, and not allow my past to interfere with your present! Ah! the bell's stopped, and we must fly!”

The Venite had already concluded, when stately Lady Heron, and her pretty guest (both a little breathless) made their way into the square family pew—a dignified appanage of the estate.

Mrs. Longfield secretly enjoyed sitting enthroned under the monuments and brasses of the dead and gone Cop-pingers, who had been for centuries the lords of Den-nington—but were now alas! a race extinct.

During the Psalms, the prayers, and the sermon, Jean's thoughts were distrait—she was thinking of Lady Heron and her story, and wondering if Vernon Harlow was in church? As a matter of fact he was, and subsequently awaited the party in the porch.

CHAPTER XXII

JEAN REFUSES HER CONFIDENCE

STIMULATING summer sunshine, and the infectious gaiety of other young people deadened Jean's sensations of uneasiness and guilt. "After all, she asked herself, what had *her* present to do with Lady Heron's past? She had stumbled into a hateful secret, and the best she could manage was to put a good face upon the matter—and hold her tongue!"

Games, talk, music, absorbed the Sunday evening, and the following day was the opening of the grand cricket match—the County against the Strollers. The match took place in the park, and here, in an imposing marquee, Lady Heron had provided a bountiful luncheon. Hundreds and hundreds of miscellaneous spectators were ranged round the cricket ground—supporters of the rival teams. The County and the neighbouring villages were largely represented—it being Whit-Monday—Harlow, Jimmy Vaughan and Gerald Longfield played—the former made eleven runs; Gerald Longfield five; and Jimmy Vaughan a miserable duck! Altogether it was a brilliant scene—the dense blue sky, the white-clad cricketers dotted about on a bright green background, the fringe of lookers-on, the womenkind in their gay summer frocks and coloured sunshades. There were also the heads of families,—stout elderly men once upon a time keen cricketers; little boys and girls, somewhat bored, and also the family dogs—who, if wise and sensible, sat and stared, and wondered what all the shouting and running about could mean?

Jean, tied so to speak, to her seat, was not very sure that she liked cricket ; for one thing, she did not understand it ; for another, you saw so little of the players, who were too much taken up with the matter in hand to talk to you—but only to herself did she breathe this.

After the stumps were drawn, came a circulation of the team among the crowd, a strolling about, and talking, till it was time to go indoors. After dinner, there was an impromptu dance, for which the vast drawing-room had been cleared. Here Kitty was in her element, and besieged by would-be partners ; but for the first dance she threw her glove to Harlow, who was an old acquaintance—chief friend of one of her brothers—though never one of her “boys.”

Jean was Harlow's next partner—who when invited to dance, said : “ But I'm afraid I shall be a painful change after Kitty.”

“ Oh, no, of course you can dance ! I heard you playing a most entrancing waltz just before dinner—and you must remember that Kitty's had heaps of practice and must have danced hundreds of miles—so come along ! ”

It happened to be a splendid moonlight night, bright as day, and between the items of the programme most of the company strolled about outside, up and down the terrace, or into what was called “ The Old Garden.” This so-called “ Old Garden ” was the sole relic of the original Dennington. Lord Heron had pulled down the fine, but dilapidated Tudor mansion, and in every way obliterated its existence ; but somehow, there is a great deal more vitality in an ancient garden, than an old house ; do what he would, he could not rid himself of the yew trees, the copper beeches, the flagged walks—nor did he dare to lay hands upon the ancient sundial. This garden was sunken, and lay a little to the right of the house, and was patronised as a promenade by most of the dancers. Here Jean and Harlow, resting on a rustic bench, were approached by Kitty and her partner—whom she cavalierly dismissed, as she halted before the others,

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and with an imperative gesture, motioned them to make room for her between them.

"What are you two hobnobbing about?" she inquired.

It had struck her that the pair seemed to have a good deal to say to one another—and though she was not exactly jealous, she felt she had a stronger, and a prior claim on Harlow, than her little red-haired friend, who seemed to absorb so much of his attention; and, unless she was mistaken, a thread of *understanding* existed between them.

Kitty, ever the prey of an acute curiosity, was anxious to know how and when Jean had made acquaintance with Vernon Harlow? for Jean was "Bedford Square" and he was "County." To judge by appearances, the acquaintance was of considerable standing, and as she had advanced in the moonlight, stirred by a sudden and irresistible impulse, whimsical Kitty decided to get to the bottom of the matter, then and there!

"Vernon," she said, "will you be a dear, and run into the house and fetch my wrap—pink and silver—possible locality drawing-room—vestibule or hall—I feel a little shivery—don't be long, there's a dear boy."

"Your description is rather vague, but I'll do my best," he replied. Then as he rose and ran off, Kitty turned to Jean, and putting a firm hand on her wrist, said:

"Come now, little Jean, I don't move from this seat till you tell me how long you have known Vernon Harlow."

"I met him some years ago," replied Jean, completely thrown off her guard, by this sudden attack.

"Impossible! my dear, he was in America—so think again!"

What could poor Jean say? She was no match for her companion—could offer no evasive reply—and remained silent.

"I suppose you know that he's quite a *parti*?"

"Is he?"

"Oh, yes, and tremendous fun. Did you ever hear why he was packed off to the States?"

"Was he?"

"Why, of course! He was in the Guards, about four years ago, and a pal of my brother Sid. I got it all out of *him*. Vernon had spent heaps of money, and Colonel Harlow, who is a holy terror, had to pay up—but this was not the real reason why he was sentenced to transportation."

"No?"

"There was a weird tale about him and a chorus girl, a divorcée, altogether a most shocking person, and years and years older than himself; it was whispered, that if not already married, she was about to lead him to the altar! Of course old Harlow was a fool to go by club gossip, and an anonymous letter, but he saw red, and refused to listen to reason—or to poor Mrs. Harlow—much less to the boy himself; and although Vernon swore the whole thing was a lie, his father stopped his allowance, commanded him to clear out of the country for three years, and earn his own living. After that, he might be reinstated."

"I see," said Jean—confining her remarks to monosyllables.

"Well now," glibly continued Kitty, "everything's all right; Vernon is uncommonly clever—though you might not suspect it—he has been doing top hole in America. His aeroplane job has made him independent, and given him heaps of new expressions. It turned out that it was his prim elder brother who was mixed up with the chorus lady, the name being the same—and George, being so unlikely—gossip gave the credit to poor Vernon, and as he was already in hot water over money affairs, his fate was sealed!"

"What a shame!"

"His old pals never believed a word against him, but they were only boys like himself—and had no influence. Sid said he was always straight, never gambled, or got

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into bad rows. He loved horses and hunting, and poking round aerodromes, and was really and truly as harmless as a fly."

"And his elder brother's scapegoat?"

"Yes, George sat tight, and did the shocked relation."

"What a hypocrite!"

"Yes, but he was well punished later. George had been married to the woman all the time; then they quarrelled desperately, with the result that she called on Colonel Harlow, to claim his protection and blessing. You can imagine the scene, and then retribution descended on George. But to return to our muttons—I do wish, Jean, you would tell me how you came to know Vernon?"

"I would rather not say," was Jean's courageous answer.

"What! Is it a secret?"

"Not exactly, but—but——"

"Well, I shall certainly ask him."

"Yes, do, that will be best."

"Then there's another mystery—mystery number two. The night you arrived you acclaimed Aunt Sybil as a sort of dear old friend, but she received you as if you were a *very* black stranger!—yet ever since then she has treated you as a dearly beloved sister—takes your arm, and leans upon you, invites you to come and sit near her at table, and so on. Does she not?"

Jean nodded, and wished herself back in Bedford Square.

"Well, then, red-headed Jean, am I not to be told the answers to these riddles?"

"No!" replied Jean, with a shake of her red head.

"No," echoed Kitty, in shrill surprise. "You make acquaintance with Vernon in some mysterious way, you have an understanding with my pet Aunt Sybil, and will not offer me, your dearest friend, any explanation whatever."

"Simply because if I did you would pass on to your next dearest friend—what is not *my* affair."

"Of course, Vernon will tell me—but Aunt Sybil can keep a close mouth. I wonder when you met her? And why she was so *shocked*—yes—that is the word—when she recognised you?"

Dead silence.

"And so you are not going to confide in me?"

"No; and, oh, dear Kitty, I do implore you as a real favour, not to draw anyone's attention to that evening—say nothing about it—it was all a mistake!"

"Was it? Ah! here comes Vernon with a white wrap!"

"I say," he began, "you two girls look as though you were hatching some deadly mischief. I suppose you know you've missed a whole dance?"

"Where's my rose-coloured wrap?" demanded Kitty.

"A nice wild goose chase you gave me after your rose-coloured wrap! I hunted for it all over the place. At last I discovered that a girl promenading on the terrace had borrowed it and, of course, I couldn't very well go and snatch it off her back, so I went to the vestibule, and helped myself to the first I could find, and here it is!"

"Oh, well, I daresay it will *do*," said Kitty. "Here is Jean—my second self, in possession of two deadly secrets—neither of which she will divulge! She knows all my affairs—she can even read my love letters, if they amuse her—and I call this amazing reserve—*mean*!"

"Yes, I dare say," he replied. "Of course, one secret is the name of her dressmaker."

"Wrong. She actually refuses to tell me where she made your acquaintance!"

After a momentary hesitation, he said:

"Oh, that's all right. It is a masonic secret, and there's no one in it—is there, Miss Dargan?—but you and I, and 'Uncle Bob.'"

"But I didn't know that you had an uncle called Bob?"

"Perhaps he is not a very important member of the family, but he introduced us," and Vernon glanced at Jean, and laughed.

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"Oh, yes, you two may laugh, and leave me out in the cold! And let me tell you that Jean has met Aunt Sybil before. How or where is yet another secret!"

"Miss Dargan is to be congratulated. I take off my hat to the lady who can keep her own counsel."

"That's all very well," said Kitty huffily. "But I warn you that I shall make it my business to discover both secrets. Oh, here is Major Coxon, looking for me—I've cut his dance. I expect he's furious, and has come to murder me in this very garden." Nevertheless, she rose undaunted, and floated over to him, with irresistible smiles and excuses. Apparently Major Coxon was easily appeased—and arm in arm the pair took their departure.

As Jean looked after them, she said:

"I don't know *how* I am to fend off Kitty's questions."

"Not an easy job, I know. The pressure of her curiosity is relentless. I told my father of my run home—but naturally I don't want the world, and its wife to hear."

"It's rather dreadful, you see Kitty and I are so much together, and it's not as if I could go away. At Marklands she shares my room."

"Well, I expect by reason of importunity you will have to tell her; things go into one of Kitty's ears and out at the other, and once she has discovered what she wants to know the information is forgotten."

"Sometimes," said cautious Jean.

"If Kitty doesn't swear to hold her tongue, I'll tell her that I'll expose her disgraceful behaviour in town. It's rather an old story now—but even so—it will sound startling. Of course, there's not a scrap of harm in Kitty, but she's too fond of ragging! And if her Aunt Sybil could hear a tale that I could unfold, she might be turned to stone! That tale shall be my sword of Damocles! Now what do you say to going into the house, and having another turn?"

CHAPTER XXIII

A SENSATION AND SURPRISE

THE cricket match was over, having ended in a demoralising defeat of "The Strollers," and already bountiful Lady Heron had prepared for further hospitality, which was to take the form of a grand school treat to all the children in the neighbourhood. The great luncheon marquee had not been removed, but withheld to be the scene of a sort of tea-banquet, for all the young people. Two merry-go-rounds were installed; there were to be games, races, and handsome prizes for successful competitors; the whole proceedings enlivened by the local band. Vernon Harlow, who enjoyed the reputation of being "good at this sort of thing," was invited to come over to Dennington and lend a hand; to this request he readily assented—though on the point of returning home.

Lady Heron, with a staff of helpers, worked hard, whilst her mother drifted about, distributing smiles and sugared speeches. Major Lane, Captain Longfield, and above all Harlow, were her efficient A.D.C.'s, whilst Jean, and the Rectory girls, threw themselves into the spirit of the affair *con amore*. Kitty and Lucy Lane were more languid in their efforts, neither of them being, so they declared, "accustomed to deal with children," but Jean and the Rectory girls, Cecil Vaughan and Harlow, were entirely in their element, and enjoyed themselves fully as much as any of the small crowd. They waited at the long tea-tables, pressed buns, cakes, jam tarts, and sandwiches upon children already replete; carried tea and milk, and

laughed and joked, and were the mainspring of the company, and one another.

After a slight and most necessary breathing time, the fun started again—the merry-go-rounds recommenced their churning, and were in constant request; then there was racing—and here Harlow was the starter, and as keen and as energetic as if he were dealing with some great sporting event. First there was the race between big boys—then small boys; this was won by a little fat fellow, who would have been expected to have been the last, and was what is known as a “dark horse,” and panted in a yard ahead of his long-legged pursuer. Then came the girls’ races—the flappers—very smartly dressed, generally in white, giggling, whispering, tinkling their chains and bangles, and tossing their plaits. Competition was very keen, and the applause tremendous when Winnie Grey, who was evidently a favourite, dashed in breathless and touched the tape. Next came the small girls; then a tug-of-war—first boys, then girls—then boys and girls. Vernon Harlow had appointed himself master of the ceremonies. His air was authoritative, his word was law, his efforts successful. Never, never, had the school-children spent such a wholly delightful and exciting afternoon. He went up and down during the tugs-of-war shouting, exhorting, encouraging, and it was whispered, that in the tug-of-war—the boys against the girls—he had secretly given the girls a hand—a piece of abominable partiality. However, notwithstanding his assistance, the girls lost.

It was getting late; there was an undecided movement among the mothers, and talk of collecting their families, when Kitty came up to Harlow, and said:

“Just before they go, Vernon, it would be great fun if you would dress up, something in the way you used to do, and give them a dance, and song here on the terrace.”

“A splendid idea,” said old Mrs. Longfield. “This will allow the mothers time to collect their families and an opportunity to cool down and pull themselves together.

"I know where there are heaps of dressing-up things indoors," said Kitty. "Come along, and I will help you to rig yourself out." And the two disappeared at a run.

Meanwhile Jean and Lucy Lane marshalled the children on the terrace, whilst Lady Heron went indoors to assist in the dressing-up. For a considerable time the would-be spectators waited, and talked, and laughed, and giggled, with their eyes fixed upon the lower rooms. Suddenly a French window was flung open, and to the stupefaction of all beholders, out of it leapt, a fully-equipped North American Indian! He wore a head-dress of turkey's feathers, a kite-like tail of the same, streamed from his head to his heels; he also wore a scarlet cloak, a beaded belt crammed with knives; his face was hideously painted, and in one hand he brandished a tomahawk, as he advanced towards the crowd, at a light-footed, terrifying run, uttering a blood-curdling war-whoop!

For a second even Jean was deceived—her heart stood still. Could this be some mad man, who had escaped from an asylum and found his way into the house—which had been emptied of its staff? Nevertheless, she bravely held her ground. As for the children one glance was sufficient! In a second the multitude, with piercing yells, had fled in all directions, leaving Jean to confront Vernon Harlow. Yes, it really was Vernon Harlow—there was no mistake about that whole-hearted laugh!

"You are far too realistic," she protested. "You have frightened the children to death—how *could* you?"

"Well, perhaps I've overdone it a bit, so you will have to take me round and introduce me, and swear I am as harmless as a pet lamb."

"Oh, Vernon!" exclaimed Leslie Vaughan. "The wretched children are running still—you are incorrigible!"

"I am sorry; I didn't expect to be such a howling success. Howl! is the word, isn't it?" Miss Dargan, you will smooth them and pat them down, and take me about, won't you? See! the bigger boys are coming back, looking rather ashamed of themselves—you will make it

all right, and presently I'll sing them a song, and dance a war-dance ! ”

And in a surprisingly short time curiosity, emulation, and Jean's assurances, collected the scattered crowd, who presently became so confiding and familiar, as to beg to try on the Indian feathered head-dress, and examine the tomahawk and knives. After this interlude Harlow performed a vigorous war-dance, with much fantastic prancing, in which the elder children were initiated, and joined with enthusiasm. The turn concluded with a song and chorus, and after all the hubbub, Mr. Harlow's wild Indian performance and song was the most marked feature, and the greatest success of the whole fête ! There was such verve and go, and genial camaraderie about this wonderful “turn”—inviting the spectators to join in had been a splendid coup ! By degrees the whole affair broke up, and as he watched the groups streaming through the park Harlow, a little exhausted from his exertions, rested on a bench beside Jean, fanning himself with his feathered tail.

“ I'm glad the kids had such a ripping fine day,” he remarked. “ By Jove, how they did tuck in—of course it was *their* show. I saw one boy, quite a small chap, dispose of seven buns—I wouldn't allow him to have another, and he wept—it would have been cruelty to animals.”

“ The girls were not behindhand,” said Jean. “ Chocolate cake was in high favour—I myself cut up not less than three large ones.”

“ Yes, you did slave—I'll say that for you. By the way, what's become of Kitty ? ”

“ I don't know ; perhaps she is dressing herself up to match you ! ”

“ Yes, she's awfully keen about that sort of thing. I see you and she are tremendous pals ? How long have you known her ? ”

“ Oh ! over a year.”

“ And still the friendship holds fast ? ”

Jean nodded.

"The reason I ask is, that Kitty's friendships are fleeting, she's a bit capricious, and generally comes to the end of a girl friend in about a week!"

"Well, she hasn't come to the end of *me* yet, you see. You are leaving to-morrow, are you not?"

"Yes, I've had a topping time down here. My cousins want me to stay on, but the pater won't hear of it. The poor man is lonely. It's wonderful how illness changes people—he is so softened—and he likes to lean on me. I wish you and he were acquainted—he loves girls, and always regretted that he had no daughter. I wonder when I shall see you again? Is there any chance of your aunt coming to 'The Arms'?"

"No, not the slightest, I'm afraid. She and I no longer live together—she is at Tolerton."

"Yes, the Tolers' place—I knew them in town."

"And besides, I have my work at Marklands!"

"So you have! I think you said you had been promoted from onions to beetroots!"

"Yes, but you know it's a three years' course."

"Three years," he protested. "Ridiculous! Well, I shall run down before long—and call to see you."

"No, no," she exclaimed. "Visitors are not smiled upon."

"Then I shall come and be frowned upon! I'm not nervous. By the way I ought to go in, and get this paint off, and make myself a bit more civilised. Lady Heron has asked me to stop and dine, so I must 'phone over to the Manor for my clothes."

They strolled together towards the house and looked down upon the park, the recent scene of revelry. Men had already moved the merry-go-rounds, and were taking down the big tent, and making the most of the long summer day; and nearby the tennis-courts were occupied, several sets being in full swing. The players were not tired out with their exertions—like Jean and Harlow—who, with lagging steps, entered the great entrance porch. They turned for a moment as they heard a motor buzzing

up the drive at a great pace and as it came to a full stop, Jean was horrified to see Colonel Alsager jump out, and hurry towards them.

"Hulloa!" he exclaimed, as he glanced at Harlow.
"What's this?"

"Oh, it's all right. I'm only Harlow," explained the American Indian.

"I see, up to your old games!" and then he turned, and glanced at his companion.

As he recognised her, an extraordinary change came over his face—he looked as if he had seen a ghost! Undoubtedly, the mere presence of Jean Dargan had effected an overwhelming shock. After a moment's hesitation he stammered out: "It is Miss Dargan?"

"Yes, I'm staying here just now," she answered, with difficulty.

"Do you know if Lady Heron is in?" he asked.

"I think she is," replied Harlow. "But I'm not sure."

"All right—I'll ring and inquire." Colonel Alsager seemed out of himself, and was evidently making a desperate effort to suppress some painful agitation. The trio entered the hall together, and there dispersed. Without the faintest excuse Jean flew straight up to her room; she could not endure an interview with Colonel Alsager—if he were to stay—she must go—*must*! And once more she looked about for a telegraph form. Harlow went off to rid himself of his costume, and resume his normal appearance. As he gazed at himself in the looking-glass, whilst with grease he removed the paint from his face, his expression was unusually grave. "So that little girl knows something about Alsager and Lady Heron," he said to himself. "And whatever it is, she's in their secret up to the neck! She hates it too! I saw her meeting with Lady Heron, and now Alsager comes along; she is completely floored. She turned the colour of chalk. Whatever their deadly secret is, she will keep it—as she has kept mine—but it does seem strange that this strictly brought up little Jean, should be dragged into,

what for all I know, may be a scandal. And yet what scandal could there be? Alsager is known to be a 'white man'—a first-rate landlord, and extremely popular. As for Lady Heron, her *name* is enough! She shines as a beacon all over the county, her example, charity, hospitality, and generosity, are on all tongues!" Well, he gave it up! But Harlow had a feeling, as he brushed his hair with unusual energy, that there was something strange in the wind; Colonel Alsager was the bearer of news—that was written all over him—the whole thing was a puzzle!

Meanwhile a white and haggard Jean was still pacing her room, when a maid appeared to summon her to the library. Here she found Lady Heron and Colonel Alsager standing together near a window. They turned as she entered, and Lady Heron, advancing towards her with outstretched hands, said:

"My dear, Colonel Alsager has brought very important tidings—his wife is *dead*!"

Jean stood speechless! What could she say? How offer congratulations on a death?

"As you are the only living creature who is in our secret, we decided that you should be told at once. Tomorrow we are going up to London to be married at a Registry Office—and after a decent interval, it will be announced——"

Just at this moment the door opened, and Harlow entered. He hesitated for a second, and then advanced with a telegram in his hand. "It is for you, Miss Dargan," offering it to Jean. Then, turning to Lady Heron, he said: "On second thoughts, Lady Heron, I don't think I can stay for dinner. Thank you most awfully for asking me, but I have been away so much from the Manor, in fact I've nearly *lived* here, that I feel bound to spend the last evening with them."

A faint exclamation from Jean made him turn to her:

"This is a wire from Aunt Henny," she explained, offering it to Lady Heron. She says: 'Uncle very ill—

return immediately—meet me Baxton Junction at twelve o'clock to-morrow.”

“Oh, dear me! I am sorry, I hope it's not really serious. Of course you must go—we shall miss you dreadfully.”

“I'm off to-morrow, too, Miss Dargan, as you know,” said Harlow, “and if you will allow me, I'll have the honour of being your courier and footman as far as Baxton Junction.”

“Thank you very much—that will do nicely,” said Lady Heron. “As it happens, to-morrow I am obliged to go to London for the day—but I must take an earlier train.”

Jean understood; Lady Heron had no wish to encounter Aunt Henny—which she naturally must do, if she were her escort as far as Baxton Junction.

Thus boldly unconventional, the two young people, (who might almost have been bride and bridegroom) travelled together to the Junction—there to meet the London mail. Kitty escorted Jean to the station, and saw her off, with many injunctions to return—also not to flirt *too* much with Vernon on the journey.

But Jean was unusually quiet and subdued, and Vernon, who looked after her, took no advantage of this unexpected *tête-à-tête*. They sat opposite one another in the far window—the carriage was full. He saw that she was seriously disturbed—how her pretty colour had faded! He longed to say something, but somehow this did not seem to be the right opportunity, and though sorely tempted, he decided to leave Jean to her own thoughts, and pretended to read *The Times*.

As it happened, Jean's brain was in a whirl—first, there was the bad news about poor Uncle Micky—then the strange Alsager affair—which frightened her—and last, but not least, her thoughts were busy with her present companion. They had had no particular last words—no talk of future meetings; were they to part at the Junction and never see one another again? No, she knew that Vernon cared for her. After a long silence she said:

"I have a horrible presentiment, that Uncle Micky is going to die."

"Oh, come now," protested Harlow. "Why meet trouble half-way?"

"He must be dangerously ill, or Aunt Henny would not have sent that wire—and he is pretty old, you know."

"Who looks after him now?"

"My cousin Mimi; she got rid of Aunt Henny, and Major Warren, and of me—in a way—and if Uncle should die, of course he will have left her everything he possessed—china and all! Please don't think," she added, with tears in her eyes—"that I am hankering after money, for I am not; but I've had a home with Uncle Micky ever since I can remember, and in spite of his rough, gruff manner, he has been so good to me—especially before Mimi came."

"Who, and what is Mimi?"

"It would take too long to explain but she is my cousin, and I dislike her more than I can say!"

"Then she must be pretty poisonous," said Harlow.

"Two years ago, she appeared among us for the first time, and as if from the clouds, and has ruled the family ever since. Should poor Uncle Micky die, as I fear he will, of course I shall live with Aunt Henny—I am very fond of her."

"I hope you will find your uncle better than you expect, but should the worst happen, and you join your Aunt Henny, may I go and see you?"

"Oh, but it is ever so far from Harlow, you know—quite on a different line, and it would seem so—so—" She hesitated, and the colour mounted to her hair.

"I'll risk the journey," said Harlow. "I say—I know you are bothered about something—another secret—this time connected with Colonel Alsager?"

"Yes——" surveying him with a startled expression. "You and Kitty are the only two who have suspected this. Kitty will have forgotten all about it, already, and I do beg of you, to do the same."

"All right, here we are running into Baxton. Just one word—when I go down to Tolerton, I shall have another secret to tell you—can you guess what it is?" And he leant forward, with an eager look in his dark eyes.

Possibly Jean's eyes may have spoken in reply; but, as she turned about to hide her confusion, in making a wild search for a certain hand-bag, her heart was thumping violently; for no one now, in the whole world, meant as much to her, as Vernon Harlow!

There was not a moment for further talk, the other passengers were taking down their parcels, and the train was already in the station.

On the platform awaiting Jean, was Aunt Henny, looking a little thinner and older, and perhaps not quite so jaunty as when we first made her acquaintance. Her face was grave and anxious, as she kissed her niece, and said:

"I wired this morning—no change!"

As soon as Jean had extricated herself from her aunt's embrace, she presented Mr. Harlow.

"Harlow of Harlow Place, is it not? A most delightful spot, we used to stay at 'The Arms.'"

As she spoke, she took stock of the young man; well-set-up, good-looking, and undoubtedly interested in making her acquaintance. Perhaps there was something between him and Jean? However, there was no time to consider such things now. The London express came thundering in, and Harlow, whose journey lay in another direction, assisted the ladies to find seats, carried all their small belongings, as supplementary porter, took a cordial leave of Mrs. Toler, murmuring: "I am so pleased to have met you," pressed Jean's hand, with almost painful significance, and watched their departure, till a bend into the tunnel bore them out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIV

CHANGE AND DECAY

DURING the last twelve months there had been some changes in the Square—notably in the case of the master of the house. A severe attack of influenza had shaken him considerably; a long term of residence in a foreign climate was beginning at last to take its toll, and he confided to himself, that he was “not the man he had been,” nor able to do what a couple of years previously had been accomplished as a matter of course.

For instance, in the way of exercise, he rather prided himself on his feats as a pedestrian. A walk to Hyde Park and back, had been no exertion. Now, if he managed to get so far, he was compelled to return in a taxi; it was the same painful tale with regard to his club; and these facts—the finger-posts of Time, and decline—weighed upon him secretly. He had no fear of death, but realised that old age had crept upon him stealthily—much sooner than he expected—and he hated to feel that every month or week, stole something from his vitality! He recalled with a pang the French saying, “*le fin de la vie ne vaut jamais grande chose*,” also that verse in Ecclesiastes. “. . . the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them”—he had little pleasure in them now. No one shared his knowledge; he would dismiss the surreptitious taxi at the corner of the Square, and arrive at the house, as always, on foot. This physical weakness turned his thoughts inwards; and as to his mental condition—no sign of infirmity there—the brain was as active as ever. His

collection was his supreme consolation ; once surrounded by his precious blue china, the world, and his bodily infirmity were effaced from his thoughts. Besides the catalogue—which steadily progressed—it had occurred to Michael that a few particulars of how he gathered in his splendid harvest might be of general interest. The longer he dwelt upon the project, the more fascinating it became. He would dictate from notes, and call the work, “Recollections of a Collector.”

Fired with the idea, he lost no time in sharing his ambition with Mimi, who, to his surprise, was somewhat lukewarm, and threw nasty little splashes of cold water over his scheme ; but he was firm ; the more he was opposed, the more enthusiastic he became. Mimi on her part, exhibited unexpected decision ; she absolutely declined to undertake the task, and imparted her reasons in cool, crisp sentences. Could the Mandarin believe his ears !

“Dear Uncle Mick, please don’t be vexed”—he looked furious. “But my sight is not what it was. I must save it for the catalogue—which is so important and valuable. The ‘notes’ will be merely an amusement to you—should you really go on with them.”

Seeing that he still looked alarmingly grim, she hastened to add :

“I know a Miss Boal, a middle-aged woman, who could come for a couple of hours, three or four times a week, and be glad of the job, and do it satisfactorily.”

“Oh, then you can write to her at once—write *now*. I always strike the iron when it is hot—a good business—what ?”

The typist duly appeared, a shrivelled little woman of sixty—but a first-rate operator. Mimi bargained for her uncle ; Miss Boal was to receive a certain sum per week—and give her services, when required. At first, her task proved ridiculously light, but as Michael Dargan progressed with his book, memories sprang up, and crowded about him, and clamoured for expression,

and he became so obsessed with the work, and his personal reminiscences, that Miss Boal attended every morning. Thus Mimi and the catalogue were temporarily set aside, and Mimi enjoyed the long hours of delightful liberty—for which she had so cleverly intrigued—whilst her uncle and Miss Boal laboured together in the library.

Visitors had ceased to ring the bell at 202; even Mrs. Brune rarely called. Secretly there was war to the knife between her and Mimi; though outwardly they were the best of friends. Mimi was mistress of the citadel—and Lizzie Brune beat against its gates in vain: she had in turn dislodged Mrs. Toler, Major Warren, and Jean, and now reigned supreme. When the sprightly widow called about tea-time, the old man was invariably out, or busy with his book, and on no account to be disturbed—or else he was at his club; delicate hints regarding Sunday dinners, fell upon deaf ears.

"Uncle Micky has not been very well," explained Mimi, "and he does not care for company, or seeing people."

"What, not even *me*?" protested Lizzie, with an appealing smile. "Why, he has told me I am a sight for sore eyes."

"No, not even you," rejoined her friend, with vindictive emphasis.

But in spite of her inhospitable attitude, Mimi was always ready to play bridge, to shop, or go to a *matinée* with Lizzie; it was only the door of 202, that she held with a, so to speak—drawn sword—not only against Lizzie Brune, but against old club friends, and connoisseurs, and what Mimi called "China Men." Once or twice she had herself brought a friend and expert to inspect her uncle's treasures. He had invariably called on the day and at the hour—so Evans noted—when Mr. Dargan took his Turkish bath. This visitor was a stout little man, of between fifty and sixty, with a Jewish profile, who spoke with a queer guttural accent, and was presumably rich—for he wore a dazzling diamond in

his scarf pin, and he and Miss Vole had arrived together in a fine private car.

Together, they went up to the drawing-room, where they remained for the best part of an hour ; subsequently they had tea in the morning-room—Evans carried it in—in these days, Johnson was somewhat lax in his duties—Evans gathered, that he betted a good deal of late, and Mrs. Webb's temper had grown frightful—especially on the afternoons when the butler was at a race meeting.

On the occasion of a subsequent visit from the dark man, there was again a lengthy inspection of china—followed by china tea. In the middle of this refreshment came the familiar click of Mr. Dargan's latch-key ; he entered, scowled at the strange hat, passed into the morning-room, and found his niece *tête-à-tête* with a stranger, who was sitting beside her on the Chesterfield—a sleek, fat fellow, such as he had come across out East—and not a Sahib—though obviously wealthy ! As Dargan halted dramatically in the door-way, there ensued a momentary pause. The visitor rose, looking apologetic—nay, almost abject—and ill at ease.

Then Mimi said in her airy manner :

“ Uncle Michael, this is Mr. Van Dele—an old friend whom I knew in Cape Town—he implored me to allow him to have a peep of your marvellous china. He is simply crazy on the subject.”

Mr. Dargan played the bear, grunted, came forward, sat down, and presently growled out :

“ Any tea left ? ”

The visitor, who had recovered his *sang froid* with acrobatic celerity, stirred his cup with a beautifully modelled brown hand, and said in an unctuous voice :

“ I have just had the greatest pleasure I've enjoyed for many years. Mr. Dargan, your collection of blue china is of extraordinary interest—and unsurpassed.”

As Dargan sipped his tea his expression relaxed ; to praise his collection was a sure and certain road to his good graces.

"I'm something of a collector myself," continued Van Dele—unmoved by the attitude of his host.

"Oh—are you?"

"But I generally buy to sell—I've a rich clientele in the States."

"Umph!"

"Uncle Micky, Mr. Van Dele says he has never seen anything like your Mandarin china."

"Never!" he echoed emphatically. "And I've a fairly wide experience. I suppose you could not be tempted to sell, Mr. Dargan?"

"Sell!" he snarled, "I never sell."

"Oh, because if you did, I'd be willing to give you two thousand pounds for the pair of Mandarin jars."

"Would you? By Jove, it's a good price! and I believe they are worth every penny of it."

Imperceptibly the talk drifted into prices, and china sales—carefully steered by clever Mimi, who was an expert psychologist, and had, so to speak, her finger on her uncle's pulse. Mr. Van Dele became more and yet more eloquent and fulsome in his praise of the great collection.

Dargan was soon alive to the fact that Mr. Van Dele knew what he was talking about. He had the china market at his finger ends, and discoursed of glaze, and colours, sales and prices, in a manner that won (temporarily) his host's heart. Van Dele, on his side, discovered that no eloquence, no flattery, could be too coarse, or too abundant, for the insatiable appetite of his host—and he supplied the greedy collector with enormous helpings.

By and by the pair left the room together, and went up to the drawing-room, in order that Dargan might explain to his guest the subtle difference between a certain pair of "Sang de Boeuf" jars; this entailed a longer talk, and longer inspection, and yet more adulation. Michael, who was a strange combination of vanity and weakness, figuratively wallowed in the incense, which was offered

to his idols, and it was half-past six before Mr. Van Dele had smiled his last smile, and taken his departure.

Exhausted with talk, and satiated with compliments, Dargan retired to the library, threw himself into his particular chair, crossed his legs, and lit a cigar.

By and by something out of the past recurred to him. Where had he heard the name of Van Dele? Yes!

Yes—Warren. It was precisely as if he were speaking.

"Van Dele is sometimes a financier, sometimes an agent for antiquities—sometimes in a superior way, a money-lender and pawnbroker. He has several shops in London and Paris; he is rich, clever, and unscrupulous—a shady lot!"

A shady lot! Warren was too fastidious, but Warren had clean hands. How had Mimi got to know this fellow? She had called him *an old friend*.

Yes, he knew the type well. Years in the East had brought him into contact with mixed blood. Van Dele was specious, ingratiating, crafty, and for all his well-groomed appearance, the fellow had an oily look!

At dessert, after Johnson had departed, he alluded to the caller for the first time.

"I can't say, Mimi, I've taken a fancy to your friend Van Dele."

"No, but he is a celebrated authority—an expert on china, and crazy about your treasures. I don't suppose for a moment that he is your sort."

"You are right. What were you and he palavering about at tea-time—sitting with your heads together?"

"Oh, just South Africa—and gossip."

"Well, don't ask him here again."

"No, of course, Uncle Mick. He has had his wish now, he has seen your collection; he has been aching for this for ages, and he made *such* a favour of it, I really could not say no!"

"Whose glove is this?" inquired Mr. Dargan, a few days later, as he dangled a two-button grey suède before the eyes of Evans.

"Oh, I believe it belongs to the dark gentleman; he left it in the drawing-room first time he came."

"*First time*—how often has he called?"

"Four or five times, sir."

"Oh, well—throw it away—pitch it into the dust-bin," commanded Dargan, and having issued this mandate he sat down, and conferred with himself.

Why had Mimi deceived him? What was she up to with this Greaser? Mimi was infernally sly—as clever as the devil, and very keen on managing, and having her own way. She had turned out Henny and Jean—he was alive to that—but was unfortunately too indolent, and too selfish—and for all his stern expression—too weak to resist. Mimi was so capable, a splendid housekeeper, and there was his nice catalogue—a miracle of its kind. Strange to say, the little matter of the glove nearly cost clever Mimi a large sum; for a whole week Michael Dargan meditated an alteration in his will, which would have docked the young lady of the sum of £5,000—all on account of a size seven suède glove!

* * * * *

In these days life was not going smoothly with Lizzie Brune. Her mother was becoming daily more inquisitive, peevish and critical; openly hinting the hope that her daughter would find other quarters. Unhappy daughter! Her debts, for a woman of her means, were mountainous; she actually went in fear of writs, and felt nearly crazy with worry and anxiety—there were certain fashionable shops she never ventured to enter on account of "account rendered"; her financial difficulties weighed upon her with intolerable heaviness and depression. Bridge debts had, of course, to be settled on the spot—and she had had such a run of bad luck! At night she slept badly, the result of dwelling on her many miseries. The poor little woman was really in a desperate case—and saw no means of relief. Her mother, who was comfortably off, would not lend her a farthing, and actually insisted that she

should pay 30s. a week for board and lodging, saying : "I may as well have it as the Bridge Club ! You lose that much in a day, because you will always overbid your hand !"

Mrs. Griffin snubbed her offspring openly—and was secretly jealous of her popularity, and charm—for Lizzie was always listened to and appreciated, whilst she sat in a back seat. She was a well-preserved, sprightly woman of sixty, with a wonderfully youthful figure, who dressed wisely and well, and was fond of society. She had numbers of old Indian friends, with one of whom she had shared a bungalow in Missouri, and the same congenial companion, would gladly share the flat—if only Lizzie could find a second husband !

The knowledge of this, and the hope of congenial company, sharpened Mrs. Griffin's tongue, and Lizzie was left in no doubt of her mother's aspirations.

If Mick Dargan would only make up his mind, restore the thread snapped by Mimi, and say something definite ! He had been near a proposal once—especially when he had stroked her hair and called her "a little sunbeam." If she were Mrs. Dargan, there would be an end of all her troubles ; her debts would be settled ; she would be mistress of a fine well-appointed house—possibly its sunbeam—and of at least four thousand a year ! She would get rid of Mrs. Webb and Johnson, keep a nice little car, and give smart little dinners—but, alas ! what was the use of these foolish schemes, when Mimi Vole, like Mordecai, the Jew, sat in the gate over against her ?

Meanwhile she, and (presumably) her dearest friend, lived in a condition of active and passionate, but well concealed, hostility.

CHAPTER XXV

"WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY"

Now that work happened to be slack—thanks to the energies of Miss Boal—and visitors were few, but far between—Mimi occasionally took a holiday, of a week or ten days, to visit an invalid aunt, her father's half-sister, who lived down in Cornwall. As it was a considerable journey and Mimi, dear girl, had so few pleasures, her uncle was good enough to pay her fare first-class return, with a couple of pounds for cabs and tips. It happened immediately after Mimi's departure that Michael Dargan, strolling homewards from a Tube station, found himself face to face with Mrs. Brune—who was supposed to be at Brighton—they had not met or exchanged a word for at least two months. The lady was looking charming in a filmy summer frock, and a becoming hat of black lace. This unexpected *rencontre* brought a bright, natural colour to the widow's cheeks, and a sparkle to her expressive eyes. Never, in the old man's opinion, had Lizzie looked better; he had almost forgotten how handsome she was!

"Now, where have you been hiding yourself all this time?" was his brusque and unexpected question. "You never come round to the Square now."

"Oh, I've been often," she answered gaily. "But you are not to be seen! Only Mimi—and of course Mimi is a darling—but she is not you—you are my oldest friend!"

"Yes, by Jove, I have that good fortune! Where are you bound for?"

"Only to the library to change this book."

"Then suppose you come and have tea with me somewhere—say the Carlton?"

"Thank you very much, but is it not a little late, and," looking about, "where is Mimi?"

"She went down to Cornwall yesterday to see an old relative. I suppose you think she is pinned to my tail?"

"Yes, we *all* think so," rejoined the lady with emphasis. "She is your shadow."

"I say, we are blocking the footpath! if you won't come to the Carlton, perhaps you'll honour me by taking tea at No. 202. I'd like to show you some pieces of jade, and a lovely gold lacquer box."

"All right, I'll come, of course. It will be like old times," and she turned to accompany him.

In escorting this pretty vivacious woman, Dargan felt suddenly rejuvenated; it seemed to him, whilst he listened to her gay chatter, and looked into her smiling eyes, as if a summer day had strayed into the winter of his gloomy existence. In a very short time he had recovered his tongue, and was meeting her frivolity with his own gruff jokes. The couple walked slowly, almost as if attending a funeral, but ultimately the hall door was reached, and opened by Johnson, looking invincibly cross—his long red face recalling the middle cut of a salmon!

"Tea in the library," brusquely commanded his master, and then he ushered his guest into the sanctum, with a flourish of his arm. Mrs. Brune removed her gloves and veil (with a swift glance in a mirror), and fell into suitable ecstasies, over the new purchases. Then, when tea arrived, she presided with much ease and grace, and as she handed Dargan's cup, she said:

"You see I've not forgotten your taste—two lumps of sugar, two drops of milk. Do tell me," she went on, "has Mimi *really* gone to visit an aunt?"

"Yes, a bedridden old creature."

"And do you mean to tell me that Mimi has

travelled all the way to Land's End to see her? How odd!"

"Why?"

"Because our dear Mimi does not care for old and infirm people."

"Except myself," he corrected with a conciliatory grin.

"I won't allow you to call yourself old!" tapping him with the sugar tongs. "You are just the age you look."

"How old do I look?"

"Not a day over fifty," and she gazed into his rugged face with searching eyes.

(Now was her chance—the ultimate opportunity of her life! Her heart beat fast, as she said to herself, "If Mimi is away, the coast is clear. We shall be engaged in a week!")

"Oh, I say—nonsense!" he protested, deeply flattered.

"Not at all—and you know your heart is young! I am afraid you will miss Mimi dreadfully—how long is she to stay away?"

"About ten days—or a fortnight."

"Perhaps I may be of some use to you, writing letters, or dusting, or—or anything?"

"No, no, thanks, I have a typist—but come in and dine to-morrow—I'd like to show you my catalogue—Mimi's work."

"She is unique, isn't she? Not to be matched or copied." (This could be interpreted in two ways.)

"Yes, she is a clever girl."

"With an amazing talent for organising, and stepping into other people's shoes."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's so obvious; two years ago, you had Mrs. Toler and Jean and the Major; then Mimi arrived, and behold," blowing a kiss from her fingers, "they vanish!"

"It was my sister's own wish to leave," he announced, frowning with annoyance.

"She could not remain, and play second fiddle—she

told me so," was the bold rejoinder. "She was sorry to go, and felt the uprooting most dreadfully."

"Come, come, she never said so!"

"Not to you, of course." Then suddenly turning the conversation. "I met Sir George at dinner a few days ago."

"Did you? How is the old boy?"

"Uncommonly fit, and much concerned about you."

"About *me*, dear lady! What did he mean?"

"He told me that you never go near the club now, or play billiards, or golf, and that the new niece has transformed you into an old fogey."

"By Jove, I call that pretty good cheek! What infernal impudence."

"Well, you see your old friends miss you terribly—they cannot spare you altogether to Mimi, and the blue china; forgive them, and forgive *me*," and she stroked his ugly hand, and surveyed him with imploring eyes.

Here she was keenly aware was *her* opportunity, and she seized upon it. This was her hour! Every moment was of value, and strengthened her prospect of future ease, luxury, and relief from harassing anxiety. How often had Mimi discussed and belittled her (her supposed to be friend)? What had she not insinuated to Uncle Micky? Hitherto, Mimi commanded the fortress, and Lizzie was the powerless and discomfited beleaguer; held off with excuses, honeyed words, and warm kisses by Mimi—who interposed an iron wall between Michael and herself. It had been a struggle for the possession of the old man—and Mimi had been victorious. For a long time before Mimi's arrival Lizzie had looked upon 202 as her future home. Michael was not a bad old thing; if slow, he was sure—and from a worldly point of view, an excellent match.

In former days, Aunt Henny had tacitly approved of her friend's hopes, and her brother's admiration—hopes long shattered by a ruthless hand. Mimi had destroyed these hopes, and figuratively locked the door on Lizzie

Brune; but by an unexpected stroke of luck, the sentry was off duty, and once more the postern stood ajar; and with regard to certain matrimonial prospects, it was a case of *now* or never!

Dargan lit a cigarette, and sat and brooded over some of the statements made by his audacious, and attractive companion.

Yes, it was true that he had not been inside his club for three months, that George rarely dropped in—Tomlin and Graves, never. Very few people called—and then his thoughts flew to Henny's crowded tea-table. Yes, he must assert himself, and not allow Mimi to rule altogether. She seemed to choke off his intimates, and had, when she chose, a cool, disagreeable manner. Poor little Lizzie had certainly been cut out; it was ages since she had dined in the Square; he had missed her too—but he was too indolent and too craven-hearted, to interfere with his niece's arrangements.

"Are you not going to offer me a cigarette?" asked Lizzie, "or have you forgotten that I smoke? I never forget *your* tastes!"

"No, my dear lady, I beg your pardon," hastily producing his case. "I was thinking——"

"Not pleasant thoughts! Well, never mind, let us do something to distract them. What do you say to a game of chess?"

"No, no let us have a game of talk—we have lots of arrears to work off."

"Whose fault is that?" she murmured; then aloud: "Why not both conversation and chess? If you will ring for Johnson to take away, I'll get out the chessmen."

Between chess and conversation, the friends put in an agreeable couple of hours—at any rate, the man enjoyed himself. His companion seemed so delightful, so playful, and so sympathetic. The result of the *tête-à-tête* was that Lizzie—who had all at stake—flung Mrs. Grundy to the winds, and after considerable and well-assumed reluctance, was persuaded to remain for dinner! Johnson,

from the sideboard, surveyed the pair with an expression of profound disapproval. The widow was making a precious fool of the old man—fancy her offering to choose his ties, and telling him he had real Irish eyes! What *rot!*

Mrs. Brune did not linger after coffee was served; her host accompanied her home in a taxi, and arranged to call the next day and take her out to lunch.

"Well," said her mother, looking up from Clock Patience, as her daughter halted in the doorway. "I got your wire"—there was no 'phone at 202. "So you dined in the Square again—and Mimi Vole has relented?"

"Mimi is in Cornwall and, as far as I am concerned, she will never relent!"

"It's unusual for her to go away, and so you have dined *tête-à-tête* with the old man! When the cat's away the mice will play."

"The mice do their little best," replied her daughter, speaking with shining eyes and a heightened colour; for Michael Dargan, unable to resist the widow's soft allurements, had kissed her in the taxi—and on the lips!

With a man of Dargan's temperament—Irish—such a kiss was the forerunner of marriage. No wonder Lizzie looked brilliantly handsome this evening. Her appearance was subject to strange fluctuations, occasioned by the condition of her restless mind. Now, she seemed old and haggard with sunken eyes, and lined face—just a withered Anglo-Indian! Again, in effervescing spirits, and a becoming gown, behold a radiant apparition of seven and twenty!

To-night, Lizzie Brune was seven and twenty!

CHAPTER XXVI

"THE MICE WILL PLAY"

THESE were halcyon days for Lizzie Brune! It appeared to her that she was making a new and promising start in life; she enjoyed, in Mimi's absence, a clear course and no favour, and her well-shod little feet seemed figuratively to tread on air, and the eyes of her imagination beheld a long procession of dazzling triumphs. She carried her captive about with ostentatious complacency, and he—for his part—wore her chains with a considerable display of grim satisfaction; life had still some favours to bestow—a pretty, affectionate companion would bring joy and sunshine into the old Corner House; long dormant sentiment and feeling awoke, and became a living force. Michael Dargan realised that here was the last flicker of joy and life, before he sank into the grey ashes of old age. Yes, he was fully determined to take what the gods offered! The mystery of Lizzie's eyes, her charm, her personality, shared with his china, the breath of adoration; and Lizzie Brune realised this fact, as the old man pressed her to him in a bony embrace, and showered uncertain kisses on her beautiful scented hair. In this newly acquired character of a fiancé he escorted his delightful Lizzie to Ranelagh—a place whose existence he had almost forgotten—together they lunched at the Berkeley, or the Ritz, and attended concerts, and sales at Christie's.

"So old Dargan's come to life!" remarked a club friend to Sir George. "I see him trotting about all over the place with an uncommonly smart little woman."

"Yes, I believe Micky is hooked at last," assented

his friend. "Though nothing has been given out officially."

"No need for giving out, when you see a couple dining alone at a restaurant, and sitting in one another's pockets at Ranelagh."

"That's true—the match has my approval. I like the future Mrs. Dargan—she's flesh and blood—*human*; the presiding niece, is a cold-blooded schemer, out for the old boy's money, shutting him off from all his pals, and turning the house into a refrigerator. Now we shall have the ancient régime—jolly little Sunday dinners, and all, just as it used to be in Mrs. Toler's day. The little widow herself was one of those that were banished. I can't understand how she has recovered a footing—but there is no doubt that she has landed her goldfish all right!"

This conversation was not mere idle gossip, but the simple truth. Michael Dargan had jerked out a proposal in due form, and been coyly accepted. The event took place on the afternoon succeeding the first kiss, when having lunched—well and not too wisely—at the Savoy, the pair sat together sunning themselves in the Temple gardens.

"We won't announce it just yet," he urged.

"No—no—if you don't wish it, dear old boy," replied his lady love, all soft compliances. "I suppose you would like to break the news to Mimi by letter. You know you are a little afraid of her—aren't you?" and she patted his sleeve.

"What nonsense!" he protested, with spurious indignation.

"Yes, but dear Micky, you are—and so am I! Sometimes there's an expression on her face that simply scares me to death; and in an argument she invariably flattens me out. Mimi has an iron will, and carries an iron rod, in her velvet glove."

"Dear little woman, how *can* you talk such rot!"

"Dearest old man, you won't mind my saying, that I hope Mimi will find another home?"

"Must she? Umph!" scratching his chin in manifest perplexity. "Well, we will see; but what about the catalogue? Mimi is my right hand?"

"No, no, *I* intend to be your right hand; as to the catalogue, there are heaps of clever girls in London who can undertake that. Mimi can be replaced—though I am sure she believes that to be impossible. Oh, we shall be so happy all by ourselves," she concluded in a voice of caressing persuasion.

Michael took her hand, and replied: "Well, well, I will see what can be done." But in his heart he knew that Mimi was very strong—and, to his work, indispensable.

"Of course, I must tell my mother, Micky dear, and one or two old friends. You won't mind, will you?"

"No, no—but keep it quiet. We will be married—say in a month—eh? As soon as possible——?"

"Yes; I must see about my trousseau at once."

"Don't have a big show—I know that the trousseau is a woman's first thought! but have mercy on my poor grey hairs. Just wear your going-away kit."

"Oh, must I? Well—anything to please you, dear old thing. Now, I'm afraid I must be off, for I am due at bridge at 4.30, and I dare not fail—not even on this day of days. To break a bridge engagement is the blackest of social crimes—and Lady Moffat, who is hostess, looks stern, and implacable. You'll have to tell our news to Johnson—ha!—ha! ha! or shall I?" urged this bold fiancée. "Johnson has opened the door to me for years."

"No, no, never mind—I'd better do that myself."

"Perhaps he guesses? You will come and dine with us to-night, won't you? And I'll order your favourite entrée, and sweet——"

"You are my favourite sweet!" declared this infatuated lover.

"Oh, you too ridiculous darling!"

* * * * *

The matter of the trousseau was immediately put in hand. Lizzie boldly ventured into certain establishments where she owed long bills, and gave extensive orders—which were received with smiling consideration. The truth being, that her crafty mother had gone in advance, and informed the principals (in confidence), that her daughter was about to marry Mr. Dargan, a well-known millionaire; and Lizzie's credit was further supported by the occasional presence of the bridegroom-to-be—a well-turned-out, rather saturnine, elderly man, who said little, but—a case of deeds, not words—presented various expensive articles to his future bride. When the lady whispered with a pathetic air, "that she really could not afford this," he invariably said, "I'll take it." Then to the assistant, "Enter it to me—Dargan, 202, Bedford Square." Here, indeed, was a most effective buttress to the lady's credit!

Yes, Lizzie Brune's trousseau was to be a dream—in fact it embodied her ideal. She had excellent taste, and exercised it *con amore*; within a week the complete outfit was well *en train*, lingerie, tailor-mades, evening gowns, rest gowns, wraps, the daintiest of footwear, the most ravishing of hats.

Mrs. Griffin, prudent soul, had exchanged a few words with Dargan, respecting settlements. "It would be all right," he assured her, "and Lizzie, who was an extravagant little creature, should have an allowance of five hundred a year for her frocks and follies."

Old adherents were once more flocking to the Square; there had been two gay little dinners, at which Lizzie—chaperoned by her mother—had presided with conspicuous success. On the occasion of the third of these, there were present Sir George, General Tomlin, Lizzie, her mother, and Dora Griffin—who happened to be staying with them.

After dinner, as the company sat in the library, smoking and sipping coffee, someone asked:

"Have you any news of Miss Vole?"

"No, Mimi takes after me," replied Dargan. "She is a shocking correspondent. I never write to her, or she to me—except a postcard. She's still in Cornwall."

Strange, indeed startling coincidence, at that moment there were voices in the hall, the door opened, and Mimi walked in—to receive the shock of her life.

One glance revealed a dramatic transformation, and the awful truth! There sat Lizzie, the arch man-hunter, enthroned on the Chesterfield, beside Uncle Mick; Lizzie, radiant and handsome, wearing a glittering gown, an unfamiliar diamond comb, and the *amethyst beads*—supreme sign of victory! There were Sir George and Mrs. Griffin, and General Tomlin, preparing to play "Cut Throat Bridge," and Dora Griffin in the background—an idle, and indifferent looker-on!

There was also before her mental eye the complete ruin of her ambition and hopes; but she recovered herself with amazing self-command, and said in a cool, clear voice—an iced voice:

"Good evening, everybody!"

Then she turned about to remove her long travelling coat—and steady her fluttering nerves.

The company accorded the traveller a loud and genial welcome, and Sir George said: "Do you know we were actually talking of you when you appeared! Speak of an angel—eh?"

"I've had an agonising toothache, and was obliged to fly back. I must get the tooth out to-morrow."

(And to-morrow would witness yet another painful operation. She must get rid of Lizzie—one of them was bound to go!)

"Well, Uncle Mick, how are you?" she inquired with laboured composure. "Needless to ask how *you* are Lizzie!" Lizzie's eyes, as they met hers, were full of laughing triumph.

"How splendid you look!" continued Mimi. "I see you have pillaged the Buddha!"

To this, Elizabeth Brune, Victix, assented with a

complacent smile. Oh, how she hated Mimi—and at the moment, what a white and wilted Mimi!

For Mimi's part, as their eyes met—and they mentally crossed swords—she felt that she would like to choke and strangle that dressed-up, done-up, scented, adventuress, who had decoyed a defenceless old man into her snare. Such was raw and naked human nature—but Mimi merely smiled, and said:

"Of course you know how valuable the beads are, dearest Lizzie, and you will be careful—won't you?"

"You may be sure of that, darling. I'm aware of their value—and they are especially precious to *me*—as they are a gift from your uncle."

"Yes, yes, by gad!" he supplemented. "They are a bit wasted on the neck of the Buddha, and properly shown off *now*, eh?" said the infatuated collector, fixing a gloating eye on Lena's plump shoulders.

"Have you had dinner or supper?" addressing Mimi. "Shall I ring for soup—or something? You've had a long journey, by Jove!"

"Oh, no, please don't trouble, dear—I can always look after myself in this house." Then glancing round, she added: "My tooth is aching frantically—I can scarcely see with the pain—so I will wish you all good-night," and with a comprehensive nod, she took her departure—noiselessly as a cat.

The reason of Mimi's unexpected appearance was due to a postcard in an unknown hand, addressed to Miss Vole, c/o Mrs. Courtenay Vanson, Pier Hotel, Southsea: "If you don't return at once, you may as well stop away. A Well-Wisher."

CHAPTER XXVII

BETWEEN TWO KISSES

THE master of the house felt unusually nervous as he confronted his niece at lunch next day. Mimi had not appeared at breakfast, and he sought in vain in her calm white face, for some indication of her feelings. Apparently these were normal—her expression was inscrutable—her talk unconstrained—she was interested in the day's news, in the latest sales, and imparted to her uncle various delectable compliments, that had come to her ears apropos of his wonderful china; and she also quoted one or two paragraphs that made his old heart glow with pride. But not once, did she mention the name of Brune, or refer in the most distant way to last night's gathering. It was when they were alone in the library, that he must break his news. He had felt bold enough the previous night, and he recalled Lizzie's injunction, when he took leave of her in the flat; how she had whispered between two kisses:

"Dearest old Micky, whatever happens—don't let Mimi *bully* you!"

This exhortation braced him, yet now, as he lighted a good cigar, in his cowardly heart, he wished he could supplement it with a whisky and soda—he hated scenes and rows, with a craven shrinking, and all his life, had most carefully avoided them.

Looking over at Mimi who was knitting a silk sock, he said, in a voice of constraint:

"I've got something to tell you."

Her bright, yellowish eyes were instantly raised, and fastened on him with a piercing stare, as she said:

"I suppose it's about Lizzie Brune?"

He nodded assent—and there fell a portentous silence. At last he dragged out the words: "We are going to be married."

"So I suppose. Soon?"

"In about three weeks. I've not much time to lose," and he grinned.

"It seems rather sudden on *your* part."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, everyone knows, that for the last five years, Lizzie has been trying to marry you—you are her haven of refuge."

"*What!*" he shouted, and threw up his head.

"I suppose you are not aware that she is drowned in debt, and may be in the Bankruptcy Court any day," continued Mimi fearlessly. "Her mother refuses to keep her any longer; she is sick of Lizzie's temper, and money affairs."

"Lizzie's temper—Lizzie's debts!" repeated Dargan.

"I don't believe in one, or the other—damned lies both—and I've known her long enough to speak. People are jealous of the poor little woman—that's God's truth!"

"Well, as to debts, Uncle, naturally you would not be likely to see her dressmaker's bills, would you? She owes Madame Rosabelle £400—she told me so, and there are others. Then her bridge losses have been awful, and are notorious. She is what is called '*broke*'—and you are her last and only hope; if you marry her, she will dip her arm to the elbow in your pocket."

Dead silence. For the moment Dargan found himself beyond the power of coherent retort.

"As for temper," resumed Mimi, "naturally she would not show it here—but old Mrs. Griffin can never keep a servant. Lizzie is frightfully excitable when put out. I've seen her myself in an emotional condition; bordering on madness. I am telling you all this because you have been very kind to me, dear Uncle Micky, and

I *do* feel, that I should open your eyes before I leave you."

"Nonsense, you are not leaving me," he protested in a harsh voice. "What about the catalogue?"

"Oh, you must manage somehow," and she looked at him with an air of cold deliberation, as she replied, "for I will not remain here when Lizzie Brune is mistress."

"You know very well that your work and experience are of the greatest importance—the most vital importance. How am I to spare you?"

"Ah, that is for you to consider! You will have to choose between Lizzie and me. On the one hand, you have a gay, lively, extravagant, little widow, who, once she is established, will not bother her head about you, or your interests—and will fill the house with hangers-on, and play bridge from morning to night. Then there is myself, your own flesh and blood, who is in the deepest sympathy with your work, and is gradually bringing the catalogue to perfection.—Of course, I shall take it away, as it is my own property," and she resumed her knitting.

As he listened to this harangue, Michael Dargan sat transfixed, gripping his knees with his bony hands; his thoughts were in a state of violent flux and upheaval.

Lizzie was his fiancée—but blue china was his passion—his almost life-long passion. His mind was in a fever, he felt ill—a touch of malaria. Yes, how his head throbbed—was it malaria or worry?

"I cannot go further into the discussion just now," he muttered, glowering over at his niece. "I believe I've got a touch of fever. Tell Johnson I'll see no one—and you may pull down the blinds. I'll lie on the sofa."

"Oh, dear Uncle Micky," she began, in her cooing voice.

"Don't *dear* me!" he said savagely. "I wonder, if like your father, you are an infernal liar!"

Mimi's face assumed a pink hue, as she said:

"Have you ever found me telling you an untruth?"

He paused, as if to consider the question, and then replied :

"If you have, I've never found you out. Maybe you are too damned clever!"

"Well, if you do not believe me about Lizzie, others can verify what I have said. Rosabelle, for instance, or Mrs. Laye, who won thirty pounds from Lizzie in a week. However, I've done my *duty*, and as far as my work is concerned—I'm sure you can discover an efficient substitute. I can easily find another situation."

"Look here, Mimi, I pay you two hundred a year now, don't I?"

She nodded nonchalantly.

"I'll make it four—yes, by gad! I'll double it if you will stay as you are, and run the house, and finish the catalogue." Then with a look of threatening eagerness, "I've a good deal in my power."

"Yes, I know you are rich, Uncle Mick, if that is what you mean—and of course if you marry, you are bound to leave your wife your money, but even if you gave me ten thousand pounds, I would not remain under the roof with Lizzie Brune," as Mimi made this desperate statement, she was trembling all over.

This was sheer bluff—but the bluff succeeded, and Michael Dargan, with his hands behind his back, rose and began to pace the room from end to end. Mimi, from her seat in a corner, watched him stealthily for quite a long time. She was thoroughly well acquainted with his strange moods; this pacing to and fro might continue for an hour. Presently she too rose, and glided to the door, which she opened, and closed so quietly it was almost as if to intimate that she was leaving the room of a sick man!

After Mimi had departed—with the honours of war—Dargan still continued to pace to and fro, though all the time he was halting between two opinions. Mimi had her mother's mulish temper, and sharp tongue—but what would he do without her? If she would remain

he could easily talk over Lizzie. If she left—what an infernal loss! The girl knew all there was to know about the collection, had absorbed everything in two years, the history and value of each piece, its flaws, deficiencies and merits were at her fingers' ends. The collection would all be hers one day—who else would appreciate it as she did? Then the half-finished catalogue, with its carefully arranged dates and marks—no one could complete it but Mimi—and the girl talked of going! Her loss would be as serious as if somebody were to steal his best black jars, or the old Ming teapot—nay, worse! If Mimi abandoned him, she would take with her half the zest and spring that belonged to his life—and hobby—it was *she*, who supplied the little goad to his flagging vitality.

Then, still pacing, he considered Lizzie. The debts were possibly woman's envious lies—and she was such a dear little woman; he thought of her pretty hands, her sweet expressive eyes, her warm and lingering kisses. Was ever man in such a damnable quandary since the world was made? At last, worn out with prolonged physical exertion, he threw himself down on the sofa with a groan, completely exhausted by such unwonted exercise of body and mind. How his head ached! It felt as hot as fire—he lay motionless, and miserable until tea was brought in, when, in a loud grating voice, he ordered Johnson to “take it away, and pull down the blinds.”

“Dear Uncle, what is this?” inquired Mimi, as she stooped over him, and took his burning hand between her cool fingers.

“Oh, go away!” he snarled. “Go *away*!”

“I believe you are in for one of your attacks of malaria—I must take your temperature.”

To this he submitted—for like his sister Henny—he was nervous respecting his health, and by no means disinclined to play the rôle of invalid.

“One hundred and two!” announced Mimi. “Uncle

Michael, you will have to take a dose of quinine. I'll send round a line to Dr. Martin, but I think I know how to treat you."

A few minutes later, as she stood before a medicine chest, and carefully measured the powder, she thought of that prone, defeated figure on the sofa in the library, and said to herself, with a faint smile: "This feverish attack makes all safe, and gives *me* the game!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

JOHNSON HOLDS THE FORT

EARLY the next morning, Mrs. Brune, who had allowed a whole day to pass in inaction, despatched a little note to the Square, and received, instead of the usual brief string of Michael's hieroglyphics, a few lines in the neat caligraphy of his niece.

"Uncle is very far from well, and has been laid low by a sharp attack of his old complaint, malaria. He is confined to bed, and in a high fever, and cannot even raise his head."

The bride-to-be, who was instantly filled with consternation and suspicion, lost no time in running round to 202 with another sweet little note and a magnificent bunch of grapes. (*N.B.*—Mimi burnt the note, and ate the grapes.)

The door was soon answered by Johnson, whose long red face wore an unusually bitter smile, as he figuratively barred the entrance, and embodied the term "No admittance."

Johnson dared not be openly insolent to the widow yet—who could tell how things might go? The Governor was a soft old fool, and she had made the running hot and strong, but Miss Mimi was well fixed in the saddle, and likely to be first past the post.

Johnson was a betting man, and of the two women in the race for his master he mentally put all his money on the "filly"—that is to say, Miss Vole. He and she knew each other well, and shared two or three guilty secrets.

She could have told surprising tales, respecting the wine cellar, and he, with regard to the mysterious visitor who called on "Turkish bath" days, and Miss Vole's late hours, and immoderate use of a latch key; between the pair was a shameful tolerance, an unspoken alliance; and against Johnson, keeper of secrets and the door, the little Anglo-Indian widow was powerless. His manner was invincibly dry, and lacked geniality—to-day, it was positively forbidding, as he said:

"Oh yes, Mr. Dargan is poorly—a touch of fever; the doctor gives orders that he must be kept quiet—no talking, and no *noise*," and he stared at the visitor with scarcely veiled significance.

"But surely *I* may come in?" she pleaded, with imploring eyes.

"Of course, ma'am, if you wish, but just now Miss Vole is upstairs in Mr. Dargan's room—he refused to have a nurse—and so she is kept busy. Perhaps he will be better to-morrow, these turns don't last over a couple of days," and with this small crumb of comfort, the poor lady was compelled to depart.

Alas! on the following morning the bulletin was the same, but on this occasion, the anxious inquirer had an interview with Mimi in the morning-room. She looked unusually grave, as she kissed her visitor, and said:

"Uncle is *no* better; he is subject to these attacks, which he had in China. Dr. Martin says he must avoid the least excitement; no stimulants, no smoking; he is not even allowed to see the newspapers, and is kept very low."

"Oh, poor fellow!" ejaculated Lizzie, with heart-felt compassion. "*Do* you think he might see *me*?"

Mimi mentally gasped at such effrontery, and replied:

"His temperature is now 102—you would run it up to 104, probably it would kill him!"

"Well, of course, I am the last in the world to wish to do that," declared Lizzie, with an hysterical laugh.

From this time forward, Mimi played a cruel game of

cat-and-mouse with her future aunt, a game she conducted with remarkable skill, and enjoyed enormously: keeping her unfortunate victim on tenter-hooks, and alternately hanging between high hopes, and abysmal despair.

One day Mimi would receive the visitor with a warm embrace, and impart encouragement, and the latest bulletin; the next, she would be engaged in the sick room, and vouchsafe not even a message!

But Johnson supplied all deficiencies, his opinion of the case was distinctly discouraging:

"You know, ma'am, the master is not as young as he was, he is, they say, seventy-four, and beginning to break up!"

To break up! This was a serious outlook for his anxious *fiancée*; who slipped a sovereign into Johnson's ready palm, and said:

"It's heart-breaking not to see him; if there is any change for the better do send round to the flat. Once the fever goes down, I *know* he would like me to come!"

"But how about Miss Vole?" Johnson said to himself, as he stood framed in the doorway, and watched the trim retreating figure. "Do you think *she'd* like to see you? Not likely!" and the ungrateful monster slipped the sovereign into his waistcoat pocket, with a spasmodic grin.

Mr. Dargan had been confined to his room, and in the doctor's hands for eight long days, and there had been no communication between him and the poor tormented mouse—indeed, the mouse was herself in high fever of another description—a fever of apprehension, not malaria. Alas! her dreams of luxury were fading.

The trousseau was being delivered with extraordinary promptitude. The flat was littered with parcels of all sizes, chiefly large white cardboard boxes, bearing the names of well-known firms inscribed in gilt letters. These were, so to speak, stacked in Lizzie's apartment, the passage, and had even invaded the kitchen and bathroom—Mrs. Griffin sternly drew the line at the reception-rooms.

Various engagements had been booked for important fittings, and it struck Lizzie that there was a distinct cooling off in the manner of her tradespeople, they seemed to receive her differently. Perhaps the rumour had reached them that her great catch was ill—and the marriage postponed to an indefinite date!

At home, she had to deal with a querulous and inquisitive parent, whose principal word was "*Why?*"

"I always feared that woman, she is capable of anything, so sly, so deep. She is keeping her uncle upstairs—whilst she tells lies below. Believe me, she is a *Budmash*! Why should she bar *you* out? You should be in the Square helping to nurse Dargan. Why not?"

It was so easy for her mother to talk, and to ask *why?*

Mrs. Brune did not know the real Mimi; so civil, and indeed more than civil, so self-possessed, and so cool. At the end of eight days the "cat and mouse" had tea together in the library, precisely as in old times. On this occasion Mimi was unusually agreeable and responsive, as she dispensed special China tea, and delicious little cakes.

"Uncle Mick is better," she admitted, "but terribly weak, as was to be expected after such a bout of fever. He is sitting up at last, you will be glad to hear," and she looked into the face of her prey, and noticed how worn and strained it was, with the wearing anxiety of the last week.

"Oh, then," began Mrs. Brune, eagerly.

"No, no, he sees no one—he must have no excitement—and naturally a visit from *you* would upset him—he is so feeble!"

"When do you think he will be down?"

"In a few days, I hope. The wedding," Mimi's first reference to this, "was to have taken place in about ten days—so I understand?"

Lizzie nodded, with a propitiating smile.

"I must say, I think I should have been told!"

"Your uncle said he would write at once."

"He never writes, as you know. Well, anyway, the ceremony will have to be postponed!"

"Must it? But why? I can nurse him—do tell him this from me—with my love. I nursed my husband in his last illness."

"I won't tell him *that*," said Mimi with a laugh. "He might be alarmed, and think it a precedent! As for nursing, no, I don't imagine your kind plan would answer. You have no recent experience. You had much better leave Uncle Michael in my hands."

Lizzie gazed at her former friend—her once most intimate friend, who knew all about her three false teeth, and switch of hair. How she was changed—she seemed to have assumed another personality, and to be a stranger. She had a disagreeable conviction, that she was in the presence of a character, hitherto unknown—and quite pitiless.

"I will tell Uncle Mick what you suggest," continued Mimi, "and you shall hear what he says. And now, my dear, I really must fly," rising as she spoke. "It is time for his medicine, and I have heaps to do—he is rather an exacting patient."

Moving slowly towards the door, she paused, and looked steadfastly at her companion, with a penetrating expression in her strange, slanting eyes, and said as she turned the handle:

"I'll be sure and give Uncle Micky your message and your love. You'll excuse me, dear, and find your way out. I think I hear his bell. *Good-bye!*"

CHAPTER XXIX

BROKEN HOPES

ON Friday afternoon succeeding the *tête-à-tête*, as Lizzie Brune was preparing for the daily visit to the Square, her mother brought her a note in a thick square envelope, addressed in Dargan's crabbed writing. Her heart leapt with joy as she tore it open, but in another moment, that organ had figuratively dissolved within her.

The note was written with unusual care, and as if the writer was anxious to make his intentions clear. It said :

"My dear Mrs. Brune,—I have been, as you know, very seriously ill, and have had a severe shake. Lying alone with nothing to read, I have done some thinking, and have come to see, that it is too selfish of an infirm old man like me, to wish to tie a comparatively young life to my side. You are still in your prime, and full of joy and gaiety—so I am writing to release you from your engagement, for I know you only said 'yes' out of the kindness of your heart, and the sweetness of your disposition—and did not realise the future. (Precisely what she had done!) The expenses of your trousseau, I will meet, of course. Send all bills to my solicitors, Flint & Co., who will have instructions to settle them promptly."

(Dargan had suggested a lump sum to be lodged at Lizzie's bankers, but Mimi headed off this intention,

saying: "If you do that, no bills will ever be paid—Lizzie will pocket the cheque!")

"Please retain my gifts as a small token of my warm regard, and keep me still in your thoughts as your attached old friend,

"Michael Dargan."

Mrs. Brune read this letter three times, and as she did so, her hand shook so violently, that the paper rattled. Then with a face as white as chalk, she flung the bomb to her mother.

Mrs. Griffin, who had brought the letter, and waited for information, read the communication with puckered brow, and her wrinkled cheeks flushed with a bright colour, as she said:

"I always feared that monkey-faced wretch would get the better of you. This is *her* work—I believe she dictated every word in the note—she has the old man in her grip, and is not going to allow you, or anyone, to turn her out of her comfortable nest!"

"But what am I to do?" cried Lizzie. "What shall I do?" and she burst into convulsive sobs.

"Stop crying, and pull yourself together! Go round to the Square instantly—it is only four o'clock and have it out with him! If the worst comes to the worst—threaten a breach of promise."

"Oh, I could not do that—no never!"

"Well, whatever you do—don't lose time. He must be downstairs—sponge your face, wear your lace hat, and tulle scarf, and walk straight into the library. There is too much at stake to stand on ceremony—once he sees you all will be well—you have, fortunately, a magnetic personality."

Fortified by this encouragement, and with tremulous haste, Lizzie made her toilet, touched up her face, wore the lace hat and tulle scarf as recommended—also a particularly becoming veil—and flew to the Square, there to be informed by the imperturbable Johnson, that:

"Mr. Dargan and Miss Vole left home this morning—and expect to be away for a month. No letters to be forwarded," he concluded, with a look of bitter insolence, and closed the door, as if upon a beggar.

Lizzie Brune, her mind in a whirl, returned to the flat with these heavy tidings; her mother, who for once looked really old and wizened, said:

"Have you seen this in the *Morning Post*?—Mrs. Bliss has just brought it," and she pointed to the following paragraph:

"Owing to his serious illness the marriage arranged between Mr. Dargan, the well-known connoisseur and collector, and Mrs. Beaufort Brune, widow of Captain Beaufort Brune of the Bengal Lancers, will not now take place."

"You see," continued Mrs. Griffin, who came of a sporting ancestry, "how your dear friend, Miss Vole, has stopped every earth."

"Oh, I'd like to kill her!" cried Lizzie, in a sudden outburst of vindictive passion. "She is a treacherous, scheming beast—a devil!"

"Well, there's one thing to be thankful for—one bright spot—Dargan pays for your really splendid trousseau."

"But what's the good of a trousseau—where could I wear such gowns?"

"Oh, you might sell some—or get Rosabelle to take them back; there is the jewellery—those diamonds and amethysts will fetch a sum that will pay off your debts—that's a comfort!"

"*Comfort!*" echoed her daughter in a strangled voice.

"Of course, I allow that this is awfully hard lines, but I knew a worse case in India, where a man actually left his bride and her party waiting in the church, bolted down the ghât, and was never heard of again!"

"I think I shall go mad!" moaned her daughter. "Mad—do you hear?"

"No, my dear, I don't listen to nonsense—here is tea

coming in—have a good strong cup, then go and lie down for a bit, you are worn out, and no wonder.”

“Fancy Mimi putting that notice in the paper, that was pure spite and malignity! Very few had heard of the engagement—now every one will know how the old man jilted me—and broke it off.”

“That can be denied and easily explained—leave it to me. I shall go and see the lawyers myself,” said her mother. “I’ll collect all the bills, and take them to their office, and Dargan shall be made to pay through the nose.”

“Oh, as for the bills,” cried Lizzie, “there’s a long account, that one day I’ll send in to Mimi, and oh, how I wish I could pay out old Michael, too!”

“Never mind old Michael,” said Mrs. Griffin, “but just sit down and have a cup of tea. Bear in mind that you will now be able to pay your debts.”

“Don’t talk to me of tea—or debts—or anything,” answered her daughter fiercely. “Say another word and I shall *shriek*!” and she stumbled out of the room.

“The strain of the last week has been too much for poor Lizzie, or for anyone of her temperament,” reflected Mrs. Griffin. “I was surprised that she took it so quietly at first; but no doubt the shock stunned her. She must get away somewhere for a change—and the sooner the better.”

Lizzie Brune locked the door of her room, and threw herself on her bed; wherever her eyes fell they were met by signs and tokens of the approaching wedding. So the house of cards she had erected with such care and patience was swept away into limbo by Mimi Vole. What was she to do? She was at the end of her plans; her head throbbed as if beaten by a heavy muffled hammer—her hands were as hot as coals.

Lizzie Brune was ill, and no wonder; it was undoubtedly a sort of nervous breakdown, and she remained in bed for several days, with her mother in anxious attendance. That clever lady had imparted a plausible tale

to their friends, and put a new complexion on the late fiasco.

"Dear Lizzie could not bring herself to live in the same house with Miss Vole—though at one time they were friends. Lizzie, poor child, had been deceived—Miss Vole had mysterious gaps in her life—and though she *was* Mr. Dargan's niece, she was something of an adventuress, and her uncle had made it a *sine qua non* that she should remain with them—hence the trouble!"

Besides this explanation, the gifted lady contrived to add several of Lizzie's pre-trousseau bills to those of the trousseau—here, alas! the lawyers were too clever, and her maternal efforts failed. Nevertheless the cheque which Flint & Co. were called upon to pay was a heavy one and the head of the firm gave a long whistle as he glanced at the sum total and tossed it across the desk.

"Well," said his partner, "if an old man *will* make an ass of himself, he has got to pay—and, anyway, it's cheaper and more decent than a breach of promise."

At the end of some days' complete rest Lizzie rose, not as a giantess refreshed, but as a haggard and embittered woman; she had been dwelling on her wrongs—the more she dwelt upon them the more unpardonable and outrageous they seemed. Long hours of solitude had had their effect, and armed the widow with a desperate purpose. She appeared strangely altered, terribly irritable and restless, and would pace the dining-room from end to end, looking more like some caged animal than a lady taking exercise in a highly respectable flat.

It seemed to her mother as if Lizzie's disappointment had shaken her reason; there had been no hysterics, no fainting fits or outbursts, merely a condition of dull, concentrated fury—and an alarming attitude of smouldering rage. Her eyes had at times such a wild look that her mother actually feared them, and she realised that Lizzie was in a critical condition; but if left entirely to herself—she would cool down, and she recommended bromide, new novels, and the sofa. It would be impossible

to continue living with Lizzie ; her temper was so violent, and her restlessness, a strain that weighed too heavily upon her own nerves. Moreover Lizzie's finances were still in a precarious state, and her money troubles were a burthen that she, at her age, could not continue to support.

"What are your plans, my dear child ?" she inquired, one evening, after a dainty little dinner.

"None—I've no plans now," was the brief reply.

"But, my dearest girl, I shall, as you know, want your room for Mrs. Hill. I hate turning you out—but when you got engaged, I arranged to share this flat with her."

"Yes, yes, I know, you've told me so a hundred times!" rejoined her daughter irritably. "But you can put her off!"

"No, she has given up her house, sold most of her furniture, and is coming to me on the first of September."

On hearing this Lizzie flew into a rage.

"Well, I won't stir!" she declared. "After all, why should I go out of my mother's flat, and make room for that wrinkled old harridan?"

Mrs. Griffin vainly endeavoured to argue, explain, and justify herself, and there ensued a scene that actually frightened even that hardened old Mem Sahib.

There was a streak of eccentricity in her own family—it was alluded to in whispers as "nerves"—apparently Lizzie was touched by it. To-night she let herself go, and screamed and raged, and pounded the table with her fists—scattering the patience cards all over the floor; her face was discoloured and distorted, a huge vein stood out in her forehead. In good sober earnest, Mrs. Brune looked positively dangerous; almost as if possessed! How her eyes blazed, and her lips twitched! Her mother, who was secretly terrified at being with her entirely alone, nevertheless bravely dissembled her fears, and did her utmost, with soft words and caresses, to soothe her frantic daughter.—It seemed as if a crack in the

black wall that separated reason from insanity had suddenly opened, and revealed a horrifying flash of the internal fires.—She hastened to assure her frenzied offspring that she should remain undisturbed for just as long as ever she pleased—to a lunatic, or a child, it was permissible to tell any fable—mentally she promised herself that, if the worse came to the worst, she would give up the flat and leave Lizzie in sole possession. By and by the anxious parent brought restoratives, eau-de-Cologne and bromide, and with soothing promises and sympathetic assurances ultimately calmed the great brain storm. Once Lizzie was in her senses matters must be explained—but not *yet*. Meanwhile she determined to run down to Eastbourne for a few days—and leave Lizzie time to recover and pull herself round. With considerable trepidation she broke the news to her daughter at the breakfast-table—saying in a would-be playful manner :

“I’m thinking of taking a little trip to Eastbourne for a few days. Mrs. Tolputt has asked me, and I can’t well get out of it—and I shall leave you monarch of all you survey !”

“Survey !” repeated Lizzie. “What have *I* to survey but a heap of ruins.”

“Of course I can enter into your feelings, dear ; I share them, as you know ; but by degrees the shock will deaden, and, believe me, that one day you will be thankful you did not marry old Michael Dargan. You are still young and attractive—you have quantities of lovely frocks. Why not go abroad, dearest girl—and see what a winter on the Riviera would do for you ?”

“Do—for me !” repeated Lizzie, with a wild laugh. “I’m done—done—and *done* with !” Having made this announcement, the “dearest girl” pushed back her chair with great violence, and left the room.

CHAPTER XXX

BROKEN IDOLS

FOR several days succeeding her mother's departure Mrs. Brune was exceptionally busy; she, so to speak, snatched her meals, and spent most of her time locked in her own room, packing for hours; the smart cardboard boxes were emptied by degrees, and various new travelling trunks had arrived. The servants noted these and assured one another that "the widow" (as they called her) "was off!" Their surmise proved correct. She worked steadily through her bureau, tore up masses of letters and bills; destroyed photographs, and endowed the cook and housemaid with a generous supply of her shabbiest clothes; her operations were so drastic, that one would have said she was in expectation of one of two events—marriage or death. Just at present there were few callers at the flat; the servants were empowered to refuse admittance to *any* visitor, and to say that Mrs. Brune was ill, and confined to bed; there might have been some colour to the statement if they had substituted the word "sofa," as Lizzie lay prone for hours, with a far-away stare in her eyes, thinking, and brooding—brooding over her wrongs.

One day, disguised in a thick veil, and a closed car, she had disposed of her ornaments to a well-known jeweller, and for a satisfactory sum—the amethysts alone brought her £500, and were pronounced to be "unique."

Preparations and labours being at last concluded, there remained but a final undertaking—or a duty, as she mentally termed it—in short, a visit to the Square.

Wearing a silk dust coat, and carrying an attaché case, Mrs. Brune rang a loud peal on the familiar bell. After considerable delay the door was opened by the second housemaid, a pretty dark-eyed girl, the slave of Evans. Evans and Johnson both happened to be out—Johnson was attending Kempton Park races, and Evans a christening.

"I've an errand from Mr. Dargan," said the visitor, stepping nimbly inside.

"Yes, ma'am."

"He has asked me to go to the drawing-room and see about some alterations, that are to be made in the collection. Can I have the key?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, of course. Mr. Dargan has taken one key, but Mr. Johnson has a second one. He is out just now, but I know where it's kept—in a jug in the pantry—I'll fetch it."

"Thank you," said Lizzie, "then I'll wait here."

As soon as the key was in her possession she said: "I know my way about—I shall probably be some time, as there is a good deal to arrange, so do not wait or trouble about me. I'll leave the key on the hall table, and let myself out," and with a nod of dismissal she lightly ascended the stairs—whilst Bessie descended to the lower regions, to suck peppermint, and write a long letter to her "boy."

Mrs. Brune went upstairs, wearing the grim face of one who has an object in view, and bringing with her a subtle atmosphere of force and resolution. She opened the drawing-room and entered with mouse-like caution; first of all she locked the door, next she pulled up the blinds, then she stared round the spacious well-proportioned apartments, and drew a deep sigh of profound satisfaction.

"Thirty thousand pounds worth of china, did they say? Well, here was her chance!"

She slowly removed her silk dust coat and hat, pinned up the skirt of her smart blue serge, and then took from

the attaché case three articles—a chisel, a stone-mason's large hammer, and a heavy iron weight, such as is used for keeping doors open. These were her implements; every detail had been carefully thought out (undoubtedly Lizzie had a certain amount of method in her madness!). For fully ten minutes she paused irresolute, only her own hurried breathing broke the solemn stillness of the room; then the sudden clanging of a fire engine unloosed her energy and startled her into action, and, with an expression of implacable purpose, she struck the first blow! This, though awkward and uncertain, was effectual, and shattered one of the celebrated Mandarin jars, which, dashed from its prominent position, fell on the floor in fragments; its fellow was speedily disposed of, as were also two specially cherished glass bottles. With practice came a certain amount of confidence and pleasure; rage and resentment strengthened her arm, and the destroyer worked away with steady savage strokes, and now and then in a frenzy of eager fury.

"Oh, how easy it was to smash china!—mere child's play—and how amusing!" said Lizzie, as with a crashing stroke she knocked a gorgeous jar into what is known as "smithereens." (When introduced to this very fine specimen of "Sang de Boeuf" her host had said: "There are only two others in London—I know for a fact—the vase is first-rate—and cost me seventy pounds.")

Seventy pounds! Bang went seventy pounds! Then she threw open the red lacquer show cabinet, flinging its precious contents into the middle of the room, and gleefully watching how the fragments cracked and fell to pieces. There lay a familiar "Famille Verte," a Nankin bowl, part of a white rabbit, and an egg-shell glass lantern—all mixed up together, with handles, spouts of teapots, pilgrim bottles, scraps of plates, and the celebrated five-clawed Dragon bowl!

The second cabinet was rifled in the same ruthless fashion; it was truly a pitiful spectacle, and would have melted the heart of anyone, much more a china fancier, to

witness the wanton destruction of these exquisite treasures—so delicate, so graceful, so artistic in detail and beauty of colour—doubtless the result of years of toil—exposed to the uncontrolled violence of a frenzied woman, who was temporarily insane.

The more she demolished, the more insatiable she became, and, as it were, intoxicated with a spirit of destruction. With repeated blows she hammered to pieces the tall jars near the fireplace, swept the china figures off the chimneypiece, finally dashed the iron weight at the French mirror, and laughed aloud as she watched the many pointed star spreading over its silver surface. It was a fact that Lizzie Brune was thoroughly enjoying herself. It is whispered that in a secret cell in the human heart there lurks a love of destruction, and an irresistible impulse to break mirrors and large panes of plate glass—doubtless from this comes the game of "Aunt Sally"! At the moment Lizzie was killing two birds with one stone—she had the delight of destroying articles of great value, and was experiencing the primeval and exquisite flavour of revenge!

At last, the front drawing-room being entirely wrecked, she sat down to rest on the yellow settee. The work had been hurried, and required considerable exertion; the labourer was hot and breathless, perspiration streamed down her face; her gloved hands, already blistered, trembled in her lap. After about twenty minutes she felt rested and once more ready for action, and was soon with renewed vigour laying about her in the back drawing-room—whence loud crashes resounded with monotonous regularity. From practice she had achieved a certain amount of dexterity, wielding hammer and chisel with terrible effect, and many magnificent examples of ceramic art were figuratively put to death! A perfect copy of the celebrated "Temple of Gratitude," or the porcelain Tower of Nankin, was battered to atoms; a vase of the Houng Wow period—rare even in China—a yellow Wanli bowl, a wonderful piece of Crackle, met a similar fate, as

well as a number of exquisite specimens, bearing particular descriptions of their origin.

For instance: "Made in the Hall of the Violet Thorn," "Made in the Hall of the Source of Happiness," "Made in the Hall of Rare Jade," "Porcelain of the Palace," or with such aspirations as "Happiness, Riches, and Long Life," "The Love of Virtue, and a Natural Death," "Riches, High Rank, and an Eternal Spring."

These examples were some of the most interesting and uncommon specimens in the whole collection. Poor Michael Dargan! How proud and important he had felt, when reading the mottoes in sonorous Chinese, and interpreting them to a profoundly impressed audience. Whatever happened—or was about to happen—the china from "The Middle Kingdom" had afforded him many rapturous hours.

Such was the destroyer's energy and venom that, in a surprisingly short time the back drawing-room corresponded with its fellow—there was not a pin to choose between them—glass, porcelain, delf, were no longer recognisable in their original forms, but merely part of the heterogeneous mass of shapeless fragments and powder which lay scattered about in heaps!

Finally with a sort of diabolical malignity, the executioner went round deliberately scanning her work, and finishing off any examples that could possibly have been repaired; these she beat and trampled down into the soft Persian carpets: persevering in her task with as much conscientious fervour, as if she were engaged in some holy ritual.

At last the tragedy was complete!

Mrs. Brune looked thoroughly exhausted, as panting with her efforts she stood, hammer in hand, surveying her work of extermination—the stacks of broken china and the dust. There would no longer be a job for Mimi—no, Mimi might put the catalogue on the fire. Should Dargan make her his heiress she would not succeed to the great collection—or its value, in the coin of the realm.

Sudden thought—the big jars on the landing. She softly unlocked the door and carried them in one by one—they were unexpectedly heavy, but Lizzie seemed to be endowed with supernatural strength. These she, so to speak, proceeded to execute with ruthless force. As they proved tough and stubborn, their end was tediously prolonged.

Among all the ruins, the Buddha still defied her, and survived! The destroyer could make no impression on his marble form—he alone had offered resistance; and it seemed to her, that his odious face wore an expression of intolerable derision and vindictive triumph.

“Possibly,” whispered a mad thought, “he hates you because you have robbed him of the amethysts!” Such things had been hinted at in psychic circles.

Now there was an end to the great collection! and as she surveyed the two rooms strewn with masses of *débris*, she gave a shrill, high-pitched laugh, which was nearly allied to a shriek.

Ah, there was five o'clock striking—it was just the right time when the servants would be at their tea, and she would slip out unnoticed.

Casting an exultant glance around the scene of her exertions, she resumed her coat and hat, replaced her tools in the attaché case, locked the door behind her, crept downstairs on tiptoe, and depositing the key on the table in the hall noiselessly effected her exit.

* * * * *

As Mrs. Brune hurried homewards, elated by her success, she met an acquaintance, who accosted and detained her.

“Oh, my dear Lizzie, I heard you were so ill, and confined to bed—this *is* an agreeable surprise!”

“I am much better the last day or two,” replied Lizzie, secretly furious at being detained.

“I’ve not seen you looking so well for ages! Quite radiant, I may say—what colour—I envy you!” As

she spoke she inspected her narrowly—no, she was not rouged!

"I'm still a little feverish," said Lizzie, who was warm from her recent exercise. "I've been round to pay a duty call in the Square."

"Oh—have you!" said her friend, in a tone of surprise.

"Yes; of course, we are old friends—and as for the other idea—we both thought it best to bring it to an end."

"And break off the engagement?"

"Oh, yes," with a curious smile, "the engagement is broken—as well as other things. Good-bye," and with a wave of her hand, she hurried on.

Her friend looked after her, and asked herself, "what was the matter with poor old Lizzie?" She really appeared to be in high fever, her face was so flushed, her eyes glittered—apparently she was sickening for something—she should be in *bed*.

Bed was the last idea of Lizzie Brune, who partook, with excellent appetite of an early dinner, finished her packing, tipped the servants handsomely, sent for two taxis, and drove to Victoria, in time to catch the boat train for Dover; leaving behind her not merely the wreck of the Dargan Collection, but many unpaid bills, and a large number of puzzled acquaintances.

* * * * *

With money in hand, and a smart trousseau, Mrs. Brune felt herself in a position to appear to advantage in cosmopolitan society—but her hopes were not justified for many long and weary months.

At first—greatly daring—she took up her abode in a fashionable hotel in Mentone, as one of the earliest autumn swallows; but sitting in the lounge one afternoon, at tea-time, she happened to overhear one little bird relate to another the frightful tragedy of the Dargan Collection—and its immediate result. The bird, who was elderly, and somewhat dingy, had evidently been enjoying a

budget of newly-arrived letters, and announced, in a sharp, penetrating note :

" They say the family have hushed up the whole affair, but it is well known, that the shock killed the old man."

Mrs. Brune, who had not heard of this catastrophe, was on the verge of hysterics ; but by a superhuman effort she managed to control herself sufficiently to remain in her place behind " La Vie Parisienne," and listen to further details.

" They do say, that it's well known who destroyed the china," continued the speaker, " a woman, who was a friend of the family did it for revenge and spite—she has run off to the Continent—but the French police have been warned, and she is bound to be caught—she deserves imprisonment for life ! "

" She deserves to be *hanged*," amended her companion—who was a china fancier, in a small way, and collected Staffordshire houses, and Toby jugs. " How dared she ! Just imagine a woman destroying that well-known—splendid collection—what a crime—I do hope she will be caught ! "

Presently the culprit rose, tottered out unnoticed, and made her way to the reception bureau, where she told the following tale :

" She had received bad news by the afternoon post, unexpected news, and must leave for Genoa immediately."

The poor lady appeared to be terribly upset—she looked ghastly white and shaken—the hand that leant on the counter was trembling like a leaf—the good-natured clerk, moved by her agitation, supposed that she had lost at least two or three members of her family, and helped her to look up trains, and further her departure.

Mrs. Beaufort Brune started for Italy that same night leaving no address. After a week's sojourn in Genoa, alarming despatches from her mother drove the terrified refugee into the fastnesses of Les Alpes Maritimes, where

in cold, primitive quarters, in a mountain village, she passed a truly miserable winter and spring. Her mother, who was an indefatigable correspondent and confidante, sent her bulletins of the rise and fall of public opinion—she also despatched books, papers, cigarettes, and tea; otherwise, in that bitter winter weather, living in two bare rooms, with brick floors, devoid of accustomed comforts, her food, goats' flesh, cheese and coffee—the self-interned prisoner might have succumbed.

Mrs. Griffin blandly assured all kind inquirers that she knew nothing whatever of her daughter's whereabouts, "for, to tell the truth, they had had a little unpleasantness and did not correspond," and yet, at that very moment, it was more than likely that the wicked old woman actually had a letter from Lizzie in her pocket. She could have told an she would, that Lizzie had ventured down to the shores of the Mediterranean, and had spent the long, hot summer in a stifling little pension at Allassio.

The miserable sinner was receiving a certain amount of punishment—she had no correspondents, no friends, had lost her gaiety, vivacity, and a large share of her good looks. She made no acquaintances and was known by the name of "Mrs. Brown"! As she paced the long, sandy beach, or climbed up among the olive groves, she deeply regretted her ungovernable madness; and that for the ecstasy of an hour's revenge, she had rendered herself an outcast for life!

A second autumn was fading, and withering into winter, when her parent sent her some encouraging tidings, and figuratively signalled, "All Clear." Thus emboldened, she, so to speak, came out of her shell, and in December, moved down into an hotel at Rapallo, where she shook out her fine feathers, and made the acquaintance of a middle-aged Indian official—with whom she compared Eastern experiences, and played bridge. Dazzled by her charm and her vivacity—now restored—and also her wonderful toilettes, the trustful

old bachelor persuaded little Mrs. Brown to accompany him to Calcutta, and there as an important Mem-Sahib—remote from gossips and creditors—she flourishes like the renowned green bay-tree, and enjoys in every sense of the word, an “Indian Summer.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DEATH BLOW

TWENTY-FOUR hours after the flight of the evil-doer, Mr. Dargan and his niece returned to the Square. He was prepared to face public opinion—possibly some sharp episode, and even, appalling ordeal—Lizzie herself!

The great Mandarin had curtailed his absence by a whole week, for he was always uneasy and miserable when separated from his fetish; and as no one was permitted to enter the drawing-room in his absence—what an accumulation of dust rested on his porcelain!

The travellers—who were received by Johnson in his usual attitude of embittered silence—ordered tea in the morning-room, and whilst Mimi went to interview Mrs Webb, her uncle, key in hand, hurried upstairs to visit what was practically to him a shrine! He entered, blinking his eyes—for the opening of the door evidently disturbed vast clouds of white dust; then for some seconds he stared about bewildered. *What* had happened? The world seemed rocking to its foundations, as he gazed at the awful spectacle of empty cabinets, piles of broken porcelain—the comprehensive and complete ruin. He assured himself that he had suddenly gone mad! Then in a flash of cruel enlightenment, he realised his loss—the loss of his *all*—what had been his universe had dissolved into chaos—and with a hoarse, inhuman scream, he staggered back against the wall.

Hearing this strange, far-reaching cry, Mimi, the light-footed, flew upstairs, nimbly followed by Johnson. In one sweeping glance her eyes took in the awful scene of

remorseless destruction, and Uncle Michael, ashen grey in face, as he lay in a state of collapse on the settee. One would say that he had received a death-blow—his blue lips twitched convulsively but uttered no audible sound.

"Get brandy, quickly!" she commanded—an order only too easily obeyed by Johnson. As soon as he reappeared, she put the brimming glass to the lips of her uncle, and said:

"Uncle, you must drink every drop!" Then turning fiercely to Johnson: "Who did this?"

"I know no more than you do, miss!"

"Nonsense!" she cried in a fury, as her eyes travelled over the piles of *débris*, and the shattered mirrors. "You had the key—you are responsible—come, tell the truth?"

"Well, miss, I understand that Mrs. Brune called one day when I was out. She told Bessie she had a particular errand to do for Mr. Dargan, very important—and knowing she was a great friend, Bessie gave her the key. She went out very quiet—and left it on the hall-table."

"Lizzie Brune! Heavens above! *Quiet!* And she smashed the whole collection. Oh, what a crime!—worse than murder! Uncle Micky, do, do, drink this off, to please *me*."

Michael Dargan obeyed mechanically, as if in a dream, and swallowed a large glass of raw brandy. Presently, feeling stimulated and revived, he rose and tottered round the wreckage in the two rooms—for some time in expressive silence.

"There's the Ming I brought from Hoo Choo," he said in a muffled voice, as he poked with his umbrella (which in his haste he had brought upstairs). "There's the lid of the Nankin jar, and half of the Yellow bowl—there's a bit of the plate with seven borders! There—oh, my God!" he groaned, "that she-devil has killed me!"

"No, no, dear Uncle Mick, do not think that," protested Mimi, soothingly. "You have many good years before you. Of course this loss is too awful—cruel beyond expression—but the china is insured?"

"No, not for a penny," he gasped out.

Mimi gave a little start, as she turned on him a face of pale dismay. Her own occupation and £30,000 worth of china, gone at one sweep!

Then with lightning rapidity she reviewed the situation. Her uncle was still wealthy; his *income* remained intact; he owned the furniture, and lease of this fine house—all was not lost—not by any means. Uncle Micky lived at the rate of several thousands a year.

Meanwhile he was searching among the remains of his treasures, exclaiming and muttering to himself, as he turned over heaps of atoms—handles, lids, scraps, and spouts—whilst Mimi and Johnson, not daring to speak, watched his movements in awed silence. Suddenly he stooped, and with a hoarse exclamation, picked from a heap, a little blue jar—unbroken! Here was indeed a miraculous escape—the one survivor of a notable exhibition. It was the same little specimen, with a double ring, he had brought home two years previously. As he turned it over with shaking hands, he seemed suddenly to collapse, to crumple up, and sank to the ground, where he lay prone and motionless, among the fragments of his great collection.

"My God, it's a stroke!" cried Johnson. "I'll call Mrs. Webb, and fetch the doctor," and he fled downstairs.

A stroke—yes—the doctor confirmed this verdict, and he added that Mr. Dargan's health had been failing for some time—the excitement of the last few weeks had tried the old man, but of this, Dr. Marshall knew nothing. The unconscious patient was carried up to his room, put to bed, and a nurse was promptly installed. The whole establishment had its routine disorganised by the presence of mortal sickness and impending death.

The following morning the patient was better, and able to articulate a few words; he asked, in a whisper, for Henny and Jean, who were immediately summoned, and arrived together that evening, both much shocked

to find their relative in such a serious condition, and also stirred in a slighter degree by the awful *débâcle* behind the doors of the locked drawing-room. It almost appeared as if there was something sinister within, or there had been the scene of a ghastly tragedy. Those who knew what the doors concealed, passed by with light and stealthy steps.

The equally shattered invalid, when conscious, seemed instinctively to turn to his sister and Jean—to him, Mimi was as if non-existent, or a complete stranger. A feverish dreaminess had overtaken him; his mind was alive with fancies; images of old days in China kept starting up before him; his memory had withdrawn to a date many years previous to the present. He referred to Warren, and others who had been “dropped”; to an imminent sale at Christie’s; he spoke but little. His tongue was still, but his eyes, and his one living hand, were continually restless and seeking. Two nurses were now in attendance, and beside the visit of the family doctor, a great specialist had been called in, but Michael Dargan was slipping out of human reach. There was nothing to be done; it was a case of paralysis, occasioned by sudden and violent excitement—nothing to be done, but await the end!

One of the nurses, a keen-looking little dark woman, said to Mrs. Toler:

“Mr. Dargan wants something—if we only knew what it was, then he would settle down—as it is, he is so restless. Can you think of anything that would be likely to satisfy him?”

Aunt Henny racked her brains, and referred the question to her nieces.

Mimi could offer no suggestion—she felt no compassion—nothing but cold hatred for the sick man; she would never forgive him for not insuring the china. Oh, *what* a reckless old fool! But Jean sat puzzled and eager. She went over and stood by the bed of the dying collector, and surveyed the grey, worn face—looking more

high-cheeked and lantern-jawed than ever—the anxious asking eyes, and ever craving and appealing hand.

"It's something to do with *china*, of course!" she said to herself. "It was his first and absorbing thought—and swallowed *all* others." Bending down, she said: "Uncle Micky, I think you are looking for something—do tell me what it is, and I will fetch it this moment."

The reply was a vague mumble, the gaze of a pair of imploring eyes, a hand lifted about ten inches from the counterpane, and then pointed to the washstand.

Nothing to be seen there but a set of ordinary delf, blue and white. Jean considered; his gesture had to do with china—blue—yes, and a small piece, about eight inches; then in a flash, she recalled the rescued jar, and with an encouraging nod, she left the room to go in search of it.

"Where is the little blue jar?" she inquired of her cousin.

After a moment's hesitation, Mimi confessed that she had taken it up to her own room. "What is the good of humouring the old man now?" she asked, with peevish impatience, as Jean accompanied her to claim it.

"Every good! I believe this is what he has been aching to have all the time—poor old fellow!"

"It's too absurd to bother!" declared her cousin. "Can't you *see*, that he is quite dotty?"

"No, I don't see that at all," rejoined Jean, as their eyes met in a flash of antagonism.

All the same, Mimi yielded up—but with obvious reluctance—the tiny scrap of salvage, and Jean flew down to the sick-room, and had the happiness of finding that her guess was correct! Oh, the joy, the welcome, the rapture, that transformed her uncle's grey and haggard face, as he seized upon, handled, and gloated over the last of his treasures! What a painfully pathetic scene—poor Uncle Michael! He would not suffer the precious jar to be removed, but insisted that it should be kept on a little table beside him, or better still, on the bed,

or in his hand ; it was pitiful to observe how he gazed at it ! Day by day the patient grew steadily worse. The world was closing round Michael Dargan, the faces of his sister and youngest niece faded gradually, and all he seemed to recognise, and cling to, was the embodiment of his life's passion.

Ten days after the first seizure, Michael Dargan passed away in his sleep, with the piece of Kang He grasped in his rigid hand—truly a case of the ruling passion strong in death ! So fast was his grip, that with streaming tears, Mrs Toler desired that the little jar should remain undisturbed, and be buried with her brother. This extraordinary injunction was duly carried out, and the fact discussed by nurses and servants, in confidential conversation, with awestruck faces, and with bated breath. Yes, there lay Michael Dargan, looking younger than his years, with a peaceful and contented expression on his face—his shrunken hands crossed on his breast were clasping to his heart, the love of his life—a bit of blue china.

In the days intervening between the death and funeral, Mimi assumed the position of heiress, and it was plain to all, that she already saw herself mistress of the house and of her uncle's fortune. Had she not laboured for this for two long years ? Now she was about to garner the golden harvest, and enjoy the fruits of her toil. From garret to cellar she already made her rule and supremacy felt, and had every reason for her confidence. Uncle Michael was extraordinarily secretive respecting his money affairs ; but from peeping into letters, and a casual word dropped in conversation, she had gathered the fact that *she* was the principal legatee. Mrs. Toler and Jean were treated as mere ciphers and intruders. She even said to the former :

"The funeral is fixed for Friday. What day will you be going home, dear Aunt Henny ?"

She also summoned a little committee to deal with the question of the ruins behind those locked doors. This

consisted of Sir George and General Tomlin (Dargan's oldest friends), Mr. Flint the family solicitor and the family. Mimi had suggested her friend, Mr. Van Dele, but when it was pointed out that he was a complete stranger, she yielded. The court of inquiry was to be strictly private, and the result unpublished.

Mimi, who acted as self-elected chairwoman, opened the proceedings by saying in a detached, dispassionate voice :

"Our first step is to have all this smashed china cleared away, is it not?" and she looked round. "To have the rooms put in order—what is done, is done, and there is no use, or sense, in crying over spilt milk."

"No, no, I cannot agree to that," protested General Tomlin. "A magnificent and celebrated collection cannot be swept out of existence, and thrown into the dust-bin," staring at Mimi as he spoke, "without *some* notice!"

"But who destroyed the china? Whoever they are, they must be brought to justice," added the Colonial Governor, in his sternest official manner. "You know, don't you?" appealing to Mimi.

"Yes, it was Mrs. Brune—there is no doubt whatever of that. She got the key by a lie, when uncle and I were away, and was alone in the rooms for three hours—where she did her worst."

"Is she a certified lunatic?" inquired General Tomlin.

"Oh, no, it was merely a case of temporary insanity. I have seen her myself, in an uncontrolled emotional condition—little short of frenzy."

"Where is she?" demanded Sir George, magisterially.

"Abroad somewhere—naturally, she left no address."

"But cannot something be done?" exclaimed Mrs. Toler, with a rising voice and colour. "Is Lizzie Brune to go unpunished? Think of my poor brother lying dead upstairs—it is almost as if he had been murdered."

"There must have been *some* reason for the mad act," said Mr. Flint, the astute solicitor. "Otherwise, no

woman would in cold blood come here and deliberately destroy thousands of pounds worth of property. We must get down to the bed rock—the motive,” and he stared interrogatively at Mimi.

“Revenge, of course—I expect it had something to do with the broken off match,” and Sir George looked at Mimi. “You can tell us something about that, can you not, Miss Vole?”

“I can; Mrs. Brune was bitterly disappointed, of course—it was entirely a case of money, but Uncle Michael behaved handsomely—as Mr. Flint knows—and I think we should keep this horrible affair quiet for the present.”

“I do not see how such enormity can be stifled,” said General Tomlin, “nor why any silence? The disappearance of such a collection must come out—it is an infamy almost indescribable—explanations will be required.”

“Surely, it is entirely an affair of the *family*,” said Mimi stiffly.

“And is Lizzie Brune to get off scot free?” cried her aunt.

“I believe in Nemesis,” rejoined Mimi, with imposing solemnity. “We can do nothing. There is no good to be gained by publishing a great loss, and having long paragraphs in the papers, or putting the matter in the hands of the law, and losing more money. Lizzie Brune is penniless, she cannot pay damages—and the china is gone—irrevocably gone—but it is not a matter of national interest!”

“That is the worldly and callous point of view,” remarked Sir George. “But I suppose we are bound to adopt it. Miss Vole, has, we all know, a remarkably clear head, and she encourages us to trust to Nemesis; though I’ve not much faith in Nemesis myself: a heavy fine or imprisonment, is more material than abstract hopes!”

“Who would have thought it of Mrs. Brune? She always seemed so sweet-tempered and gentle,” said Mrs. Toler.

"One person must be informed," said Sir George, "and that is her mother. She had better let her daughter know that she must give England a wide berth."

"*That* will be no grief to Mrs. Griffin!" rejoined Mimi, with peculiar emphasis. "Well, now," looking round, "I suppose I may give orders to Johnson and tell him to have all the rubbish removed—at *night*."

"What—before the funeral?"

"Yes, Aunt Henny, why not?"

"And when this terrible loss is known, as it must be, what is one to say?" demanded General Tomlin.

"Say!" repeated Mimi, who was ever ready with explanations, "that in the absence of the family, a lunatic got into the house and destroyed the entire collection—smashing the whole to atoms."

"The outrage, that has been committed, no doubt caused the death of my poor old friend, Michael Dargan," and with this verdict from his former schoolfellow, the inquest on the china ended, and the committee meeting dissolved.

CHAPTER XXXII

DISAPPOINTMENT

THE funeral of Michael Dargan was both large and imposing, and fitly accorded with the solemnity and dignity of the Square. An immense procession of superior motor-cars, and carriages, followed the four-horsed hearse, as it moved away from the corner house. Many former associates who had come to pay a last tribute to their friend, were to be noted in the long winding *cortège*; club acquaintances, notable collectors of artistic treasures, and men whom he had known in those far-away golden days in the Middle Empire.

In spite of the careful precautions of Mimi and the locked lips of Sir George and the General, a sinister whisper was floating in the air that "something had happened to the collection—and the blow had killed Dargan."

There had been a momentary awkwardness and delay when the chief mourners entered the large closed carriage that was to convey them to the cemetery. Mrs. Toler stepped in heavily, sat down uncomfortably on her long new veil, and motioned to Jean to take the seat beside her. After all, Jean had been Michael's adopted daughter, and lived under his roof ever since he had a roof in England. But with a quick gesture of negation Mimi usurped the vacant place, saying:

"No, no, dear Aunt Henny, *I* am the eldest, my place is beside *you*," and she glanced at Jean with bright contemptuous eyes.

Mrs. Toler bit her lip, but offered no remonstrance;

on such a melancholy occasion it was not becoming to wrangle about places in a mourning coach ; but she assured herself with conviction that had Michael been able to witness his own funeral, he would have seconded her wish.

After the obsequies—came the reading of the will. The relations and intimate friends of the departed sat round the dining-room, as if in anticipation of family prayers.

Mr. Flint, looking portentously grave and secretive, read with clear deliberation the last will and testament of his client, amid a silence, during which you might have heard the fall of the proverbial pin.

First, came a few legacies to god-children and charities—then Mr. Flint cleared his throat and added—as if in an aside :

“The bulk of Mr. Dargan’s fortune may seem surprisingly small ; but some years ago, acting on my advice—and fearing that his outlay on china might lead him to make heavy inroads on his capital—he sank the sum of twenty thousand pounds in an annuity, in order to suitably support his family, and establishment. I need scarcely remind you that the interest of this sum now lapses to the Insurance Company.”

Here he paused impressively, as if in order to give his audience time to assimilate this piece of information—and then resumed the reading :

“To my sister, Henrietta Emily Toler, I bequeath the lease and furniture of 202, Bedford Square, Bloomsbury ; also the plate, linen, pictures and heirlooms, and her choice of two pieces of china, value twenty pounds. To my niece and god-child, Jean Cameron Dargan, the daughter of my only brother, I bequeath the sum of ten thousand pounds in Chinese Imperial Bonds, to be settled exclusively on herself and heirs. To my niece, Mimi Vole,” another significant pause—Mimi, very pale, sat stiffly erect, with tightly-locked hands, and an

expression of defiant confidence—" *I bequeath my well-known collection of Oriental china intact ; valued at £30,000 ; part of which, as specified in the catalogue, and marked by me in red ink, I require her to keep, and subsequently leave to the nation, to be known as 'The Dargan Bequest' ; the remainder, I empower her to sell in order to bring in a fixed income, viz., the interest on £10,000, for which these marked pieces represent ample value.*"

Mimi listened to her doom with a rigid face. So all her scheming, her self-denial, and her toil, had been utterly wasted—she sat as it were among the ruins of her hopes—her future was represented by masses of broken crockery ; and she was little better off than on the day she first appeared in the Square, more than two years previously, and this conviction figuratively plunged a two-edged dagger into her heart ! When the reading of the will had concluded, her aunt and cousin hastened to condole and sympathise with the victim of Mrs. Brune, who rose and stood tall and grim, with her hands tightly pressed together. Her face was chalk white ; she had bitten her lips till they bled—and, altogether, she presented an alarming, and ghastly appearance.

"My poor dear girl," murmured Mrs. Toler. "I know it is a cruel, cruel, loss—we must do what we can to help you," taking her hand as she spoke ; but Mimi, snatching it away, threw her a look of intense hostility, and escaped to her own room—where she remained rigorously secluded for two days—refusing to see anyone, but the maid who brought her meals. She had withdrawn to staunch her wounds, endeavour to sustain the shock of defeat—and put together the shattered fragments of her hopes.

As the result of Mimi's retirement, Mrs. Toler and Jean found themselves *tête-à-tête* at dinner, and the former, as she resumed her old place, felt a pardonable glow of satisfaction. The house, with all its contents down to

the very fork she held, was her own exclusive property. Why had Michael left it to her? Perhaps as a salve to his conscience, for the manner in which she had been hustled from its doors. Well, her income of five hundred a year would not go far in its upkeep—she would sell the lease, and she and Jean would live together as happy as the days were long. Naturally she and Jean discussed the two great events of the day—the funeral, and the reading of the will.

“No wonder Mimi is so upset.” It’s too hard that Mrs. Brune’s vengeance should recoil on poor Mimi,” said her soft-hearted aunt. “Her whole fortune has been swept away—oh, what a cruel, and undeserved, stroke!”

“Not undeserved!” announced a loud voice from the sideboard. The startled ladies turned their heads, and there stood Johnson, with a flaming face—but fairly steady on his legs, and in his speech. He had been, so to speak, celebrating his master’s funeral, and felt inspired with a courage to do and say *anything*. Mrs. Toler was once more mistress of the house and Mimi’s treacherous confidant (with whom she had quarrelled bitterly) was determined that her relatives should hear the truth—and nothing but the truth!

“Johnson—you—you—forget yourself,” stammered Mrs. Toler.

“No, ma’am, excuse me, I do *not*! It’s my duty to speak,” bringing out every word with laboured emphasis. “I cannot stand here dumb-like, when you say Miss Vole is to be *pitied*. She got her due. When she come back and found Mrs. Brune running in as she used to do, the wedding fixed up, and the old gentleman so happy-like, Miss Vole just took and flung Mrs. Brune out—same as she served yourself, and the rest——”

“*Johnson!*” gasped his mistress.

“Yes, it’s true; she talked and argued, and worried Mr. Dargan into a real bad go of fever; he kept his room, and she kept Mrs. Brune out, and burned her notes. I

saw her myself—she worked cruelly on the poor old man all day long—and she left him no peace—so he gave in at last, and broke off the match. She stood over him when he wrote the letter—and it about turned Mrs. Brune's brain—she was always a flighty sort—and Miss Vole, who was one too many for any of us here, only got her due this day—and not half her due—if I was to tell you about them that come in—and them that went out——”

Mrs. Toler, unable to stem this outpouring by eye, tongue, or gesture, rose, with magnificent dignity, and sailed forth in silence, followed, rather reluctantly, by Jean, leaving Johnson apostrophising the dessert, with an eye on the decanters.

When the ladies had reached the morning-room Mrs. Toler sank into an arm-chair, and gasped out: “This sort of scene always unnerves me! I knew Johnson drank—but he never showed it obviously, till to-night.”

“Yes, he is intoxicated; but all the same, Aunt Henny, he is speaking the truth—I'm sure of that—in *vino veritas*. You and I know Mimi by this time.”

“Yes, and you don't like her, my dear, do you?”

“No—or ever shall. I should be *ashamed* to like Mimi—she is so intriguing, deceitful, and double-faced. She was Mrs. Brune's dearest friend was she not? And you see how she served *her*!”

“That's true, she turned us all out, as that drunken creature said; you and I, and poor Warry, and Lizzie—now comes what she summoned for others—Nemesis has overtaken Mimi herself!”

“And what is to be done?—she is penniless. Is she to live with you? She will try to——”

“My dear, how can you ask such a ridiculous question? Mimi is clever enough to find her own way about the world, and Mr. Flint tells me that the china in this room and the library is valuable; it is her property, except for my two pieces, and may bring in a couple of thousand

pounds. I shall give her the two red lacquer cabinets and make her a small allowance."

"So this is now your own house, Aunt Henny! I *am* glad!"

"Yes, a most unexpected legacy. I shall sell the lease and furniture—of course the heirlooms will be yours. We shall have to remain for some time to wind up affairs, and then go off to the Cottage."

"Yes, and what will you do with Johnson and Mrs. Webb?"

"Perhaps the next tenant will take them over? After his behaviour to-night I ought to give Johnson notice, but I shall overlook it, owing to circumstances. We don't want an upheaval at the eleventh hour."

The ensuing days were crowded with engagements—lawyers, house-agents and condoling callers, not to speak of quantities of correspondence. Mimi emerged in becoming mourning, pale, composed, self-effacing—the original Mimi, who had first come to the Square! She had evidently adjusted her mind to the new conditions; her attitude to her aunt was altered; here was a subdued, solicitous niece, hanging on her words and wishes, offering services and attentions—but these were not required; hints respecting her companionship, when Jean was married, received polite, but irresponsible attention. Mrs. Toler could not forget (as Mimi supposed) their struggle for the keys, and the frosty welcome she had accorded her when she ran up for a few days' shopping—and contrived to make her feel a complete outsider in the house that had been her home for years.

Mimi Vole had a low estimate of the intelligence of her relatives. She set down Aunt Henny as a dull, easy-going, self-indulgent old woman, who hated exertion, or trouble, and could be *led* with ease. Jean had both backbone and a temper—but Jean would not interfere with her plans. Aunt Henny was getting on, her sight was indifferent—she required someone to write her letters and read aloud. After viewing the situation from

every angle, Mimi made up her mind to stick to Aunt Henny for the present. Aunt Henny was fond of her, and if there had been one or two uncomfortable passages between them, the old woman was easy-going, her memory failing, and they were no doubt forgotten. With regard to this, there never was a more painful case of foolish self-deception. For all her soft manner and lazy ways Mrs. Toler had a clear and retentive memory.

It was not long before shrewd Mimi realised that her advances were useless. If Aunt Henny took a companion it would not be *her*—though she had more than once offered her convinced opinion that female relations without ties, should live together—blood was thicker than water : but alas ! all her wiles and flatteries proved unavailing. The remaining china was duly valued and disposed of for an unexpectedly good price. Mimi refusing assistance and hints, undertook this transaction, and subsequently lodged to her credit the sum of £1,800. When all had been satisfactorily accomplished, she collected her belongings (which were considerable) and departed on a long visit to the mysterious aunt in Cornwall.

Before Mimi departed, seeing there was nothing further to be had from either aunt or cousin, she figuratively burned her boats, and distributed between them some stinging little speeches of personal criticism, and almost indecent candour. In this particular line Mimi was an adept ; her subtle remarks said little, but implied much, and the effect of her poisonous pin-pricks rankled for days. On *this* occasion, there were no parting embraces on the door step, no energetic wavings of an expressive handkerchief.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MRS. VANDERHOM

THE lease of No. 202 was disposed of with flattering promptitude, but the purchasers had no use for French furniture—or even old family servants. An institution was about to establish itself in the former sanctuary of blue china; there was much to do, and as Mrs. Toler expressed it, “She did not know which way to turn”; an auction was impending, the staff were under notice, packing cases filled the drawing-rooms, the carpets were up, the curtains down; and a certain amount of straw, and the smell of rank tobacco hung about the passages. The library looked bare and unhappy, no longer embellished by handsome cabinets, costly china, pictures, and books; a disorderly welter of Chinese embroideries lay on the Chesterfield, a large white box filled a chair, Jean was sewing, the room was in disorder, and totally unfit for visitors, when the door was thrown wide, and Johnson announced:

“Mrs. Vanderhom——”

Being under notice, Johnson derived a certain amount of malicious pleasure from keeping out the right and expected guest, and introducing the tiresome and unwelcome. Here was a specimen of the latter! A dark, stout, resolute-looking woman of forty, handsomely dressed; wearing a hat bristling with aigrettes, and a string of fine pearls, entered, walked directly to a chair (she had once occupied) and seated herself with an air of breathless satisfaction.

Mrs. Toler laid down her pen, and stared at the new-

comer in blank bewilderment—she recognised with some relief that the stranger was not a beggar. No, she had not called to make an appeal for churches, or charities ; obviously she did not belong to that particular class, looking far too opulent, and too self-assured. Here was a customer to inspect the French furniture, which was being offered for special sale. As she was about to speak, the stranger broke the silence, and said in a glib guttural voice :

“Excuse me, Mrs. Toler, but being in the neighbourhood, I’ve called—about——” and she hesitated.

“Yes, yes, I know,” eagerly assented Mrs. Toler, who, in this wealthy individual, beheld a likely customer. “You have come to see the Empire suite ? ”

“No, I have come to tell you a few facts about your niece, Mimi.”

A moment’s silence, then Mrs. Toler said in her stiffest manner, rising as she spoke to her full height of five feet two inches :

“Possibly you mean well—but I do not discuss my relations with strangers.”

“Bless you, my dear lady ! Mimi and I are—or rather *were*—old pals ; I’ve known Mimi for years—ever since she first came out to South Africa, and many a topping time we had together—balls, picnics, races, and the like. Why she spent months in my house—though, between ourselves, Vanderhom never liked her. I called on her here, and saw her in this very room—the young lady,” nodding at Jean, “will remember me ? ”

“Yes,” she assented. “I recollect your visit perfectly.”

“And you were turned out of the room, eh ? ” Then pointedly addressing Aunt Henny, she continued : “I came to ask your niece to pay a debt she owed me—a matter of two hundred pounds. I did not get it then—and I need not tell you that I’m not likely to get it *now*. Her husband has collared all her savings, and bolted to the States with a little manicure girl.”

"Her husband!" repeated Mrs. Toler, in angry astonishment. "Surely you are not speaking of Miss Vole?"

"Oh, yes, she changed that name five years ago, when she became Mrs. James Courtenay Vanson."

On receiving this unexpected information Mrs. Toler hastily retreated two steps, and sat down on the sofa, amidst the unfortunate Chinese embroideries.

"Major Warren knew that Mimi was married," put in Jean. "He saw her the second time he was in South Africa, but he kept it to himself."

Mrs. Toler turned a deeply flushed face upon her visitor, and murmured helplessly:

"Mimi married—somehow I cannot believe it!"

"If you will allow me to say my say—it's what I'm here for," said Mrs. Vanderhom, "I've come in your interests. You will soon believe the news, and I've brought you proofs. Mimi has blindfolded her family, as well as heaps of friends, but may be," fixing a pair of handsome black eyes on her hostess, "you'd rather *not* see?"

"I have seen some things," conceded Mrs. Toler. "I confess I've been disappointed in my niece; but if it's not a rude question, may I ask how you are concerned in our affairs?"

"Oh, yes, I'll explain," replied Mrs. Vanderhom, with an intimate gesture, and flinging aside her thick feather boa. "It's like this; Mimi and I were sworn friends; seven or eight years ago her people were rolling in money, that is to say her father was rich, and so were we—both in the mining interests—spending and enjoying the easy-coming money. As Mrs. Vole was delicate, I took Mimi about, half pal, half chaperon, and as I've told you already, she put in many a day in our place."

Mrs. Toler nodded her head—unconsciously her attitude had relaxed.

"Mimi was tremendously admired—not so much for her beauty as for her elegant air and style: she always

said and did just the right thing, and knew how to put on her clothes, to make the best of herself—and get the best out of others. She had crowds of lovers. At last she accepted a man from Delagoa Bay, enormously rich, but with a face and figure like a rhinoceros—but, bless you, Mimi did not care! she was ‘out’ for money, and full of ambition. Then Mr. Vole was killed in a motor accident, and their affairs went smash—it was a regular wash-out! The match, and the man, went off, and the Voles were most awfully poor. After a bit, thanks to friends, they pulled round, and in spite of all that her mother could say, or pray, or do, Mimi went on the stage as a Spanish dancer—and had a big success—anyway, at first; her dancing was wonderful—fascinating, fierce, or frantic. After a bit Mrs. Vole carried the girl off to Durban, where she set up a small and select private hotel. She was a capable woman—when not overruled by her daughter; necessity had driven her to show her powers, but she was not very strong; trouble had told upon her—and by all accounts, she had more than her share.”

“Poor Julia!” sighed her sister.

“The hotel did well. Mimi was receptionist, and a great draw, till she met her fate, and her bane, Jim Vanson, a handsome, good-for-nothing Englishman who had been in the Army, was broke for debt, and other matters, and was then a trooper in the Mounted Police. Vanson was a splendid horseman, came of an old family, had been educated at a public school, and had beautiful manners—I’ll allow him all *that*. He made desperate love to Mimi, as was his way—she became infatuated, and crazy about ‘Handsome Jim,’ as he was called.”

“Crazy—infatuated! I cannot imagine that!” protested her aunt.

“No; possibly you’ve not discovered that Mimi is an iceberg with a furnace! You have never guessed at the burning, fiery furnace—nor how it can become a roaring blast! In spite of all her mother could say, or do, and

in spite of obstacles, advice, and warnings, Mimi married Jim Vanson, and poor Mrs. Vole (to make the best of a bad business) took the pair to live in the hotel, where he was by way of keeping the books; a nice easy change from the hard work of a trooper! Vanson behaved himself, and was steady enough as long as Mrs. Vole lived; she had an excellent influence, and there were some good streaks in his character—maybe, if he had not had such a scheming, double-faced, wicked wife, he'd have been different. Jim was naturally lazy, and liked dumping his load on other people's backs, and taking his ease; and he was a spendthrift, and shady with regard to money. Not very long after Mrs. Vole's death, the hotel business began to fall off; Mimi was desperately jealous, and suspected and cold-shouldered, all women guests—especially if young and pretty; believing they had designs upon her good-looking husband. Vanson neglected the books for billiards and the bar, there were quarrels, debts, a break-up, and Mimi took the reins into her own hands—and looked about for a fresh start!"

At this moment Johnson once more opened the door, and on the present occasion, entered behind the fine old Sheffield tray. It was a little early for tea, but he was full of curiosity respecting the visitor, and expected to pick up some useful information. As he arranged cups, saucers and plates, with unusual deliberation, Mrs. Toler glanced significantly at Mrs. Vanderhom—it was a case of "To be continued later," and she said in her most gracious manner:

"You will have a cup of tea, won't you?"

"Thank you," assented her visitor, moving nearer the table. "Talking makes one thirsty—and I'm afraid that I must seem a bit long-winded!"

"Not at all," said Jean, coming forward to assist her aunt. "What you have told us has been so interesting."

"And surprising?"

"No, not to me. Thank you, Johnson, that will do"—to Johnson, who was hovering, and who, as he withdrew,

received a sharp glance from a lady to whom he had so often refused admittance.

Mrs. Vanderhom removed her gloves and veil and chattered easily with Jean—a name emblazoned in golden letters on a cardboard-box had started the topic of millinery. Meanwhile Mrs. Toler gravely surveyed the stranger, and consolidated her impressions; a swarthy woman of forty, with fine eyes, masses of black hair, a heavy jaw, a long upper lip—and a remarkably short neck.

So this was Mimi's confidante, helper, and chaperon! A curious personality; not British; kind-hearted, generous, possibly indiscreet—and unmistakably vulgar.

"Well, I may as well finish my tale!" said Mrs. Vanderhom, as she brushed the crumbs from her lap. "That man of yours knows me; times and times he has said to me, 'Miss Vole is not at home.' I was afraid he would not let me in to-day, so I rushed past him," and she laughed and displayed a set of beautiful teeth. "Well, to go on—somehow or other, Mimi had heard of an old bachelor uncle who lived in grand style in London, immensely rich, and crazy about china. Mimi could always see an opportunity, and she decided to go home and look him up. Between her father's smash, and Vanson's record, South Africa was rather an awkward residence for the couple—naturally Mimi could not leave Jim behind, and so she came to me—we were still well-to-do—and with tears and promises, borrowed £200 for passage money—and to keep them going till she could make her way; and I handed out the coin."

"I see, that was very kind of you——"

"And she signed a paper, which I've brought with me—and two or three of her letters, telling me of her plans—here they are," and, opening a gold bag studded with sapphires, Mrs. Vanderhom offered some creased correspondence to Mrs. Toler, who glanced over them; undoubtedly the letters were written by Mimi, and signed "M. Vanson." These she passed on to Jean—they afforded irrefutable proof that their visitor had not been inventing a tale,

"*pour passer le temps !*" "By and by we began to have our own troubles," continued the lady. "There was a frightful slump in mines—many money bothers—my health broke down—and I lost sight of lots of friends—the way of the world when you are poor ! Later, I came home, very badly off, and, thinking to recover the money I'd lent Mimi. A mutual acquaintance, Mr. Van Dele, gave me the Vansons' address—they were living near the British Museum ; he told me that she spent her time in the reading-room, and attending sales of china, he could not say *why*—but Mrs. Vanson always had a first-rate reason for whatever she did ! I wrote, and told her of our changed circumstances, and asked for repayment of the loan. No reply. I called, they had left their rooms and had vanished as it were, into space ! At last I discovered Mimi comfortably established with the rich uncle in this very house. *You* saw me," appealing to Jean. "I came for money which I wanted so badly ; she put me off with twenty pounds, and promises and kisses ; she knew I could not press her legally—the agreement had not been stamped. If I called or wrote it was useless. I saw Vanson loafing about, looking uncommonly handsome and well groomed, and Van Dele told me Mrs. Vanson had got up Oriental blue china, studied books and collections, and was now a first-rate professional expert—and her uncle's right hand. Vanson lodged near by, they met frequently, and by stealth. The butler here was in the secret—he and Jim Vanson went racing together. Yes, she kept him supplied with money, cigars—and wine. Jim had not a penny piece of his own, and his relatives would never acknowledge him—but he put in a fairly good time and lived on his wife—who lived on her uncle ! In Mimi's opinion, nothing in the world was too good for Jim—as long as he did not carry on with other women. Two hundred a year from Mr. Dargan did not go far with Jim, so she sold some of the china, and lovely bits of jade to Van Dele—a couple of thousand pounds worth."

"No, no, no, Mimi never did *that*!" protested Mrs. Toler, surveying her guest with troubled eyes.

"She truly did!" rejoined the lady, with decisive emphasis. "She had the collection in charge, and only took specimens not likely to be missed—any way, the old man's sight was bad; in case of trouble, some pieces were even temporarily put back! Van Dele said to me, 'I wonder what Dargan would have said if he had known that a pair of little cups he showed me with great pride were actually *sold*?'—Ignorance was bliss!"

"It was indeed," assented her hostess, in a choked voice.

"I really believe Mimi would not have stuck at anything to serve her idol. I've noticed the pair dining in a little restaurant in Dean Street, she just gloating over him, hanging on every word—it was pitiful to see any poor woman such an abject slave! Vanson's great asset is his appearance, he looks like the hero of a story book, with clear-cut features, *very* expressive eyes, and the air of a well-bred gentleman. He behaved pretty well to Mimi—and she kept a tight hand over him; but for all that, there were whispers about him, and a little manicurist that nearly drove Mimi mad! *Mad*, because she was shut up with her uncle, a sort of prisoner, and Jim was, so to speak, at large, in Piccadilly and elsewhere. However, he could always talk her over—and persuade her to anything."

"Like Mimi herself!"

"Yes; when I was still terribly hard up, one day I met Mimi in the street and accosted her, she just pushed me rudely aside and jumped into a passing taxi—that is the last I've seen of her! Then all at once—our sun rose—and the money flowed in."

"The turn of Fortune's wheel?"

"My husband is a wonderfully clever fellow, full of grit, half Dutch, half American by birth, but a real 'Yank' through and through: he knows when the ball

is at his feet—and when to wait. This time he has waited to some purpose ! ”

“ You are not English, are you ? ” inquired her listener.

“ No, my father was a Boer farmer, and my mother Irish—a governess. I’m a queer mixture—like Hans. I shall soon see him, for I’m off in the Castle Liner next week ; but before I left, I thought as I knew all Mimi’s history, I’d call and show you the young woman in her true colours.”

“ Yes, and very dark and ugly they are ! ”

“ The loss of the china has hit her unexpectedly hard—her troubles and schemes gone for nothing—and that’s not the worst.”

“ No—so I gather.”

“ Jim has treated her like the cad he is ! She had a nice nest-egg of close on £2,000 in notes, and they were preparing to try their luck in the States—in fact she and Jim were to sail in a few days—and were partly packed. She kept the bank notes by her in a small leather case, and awoke one morning to find that her precious scamp of a husband had stolen her money, collected his luggage, and gone off to South America in the company of the little manicure girl ! Mimi is utterly crushed, and hopelessly stranded.”

After a moment’s reflection, her aunt said : “ Mimi has great resources, and will soon find another opening.”

“ Yes, you may bet on that ! Van Dele has seen her, and says she is like an old, old woman—so withered and wilted, and mad—longing to strike at someone ! ”

“ I do sincerely hope she won’t come *here* ! ” said Jean gravely.

“ No, I don’t see how she could—not after the way she left us,” rejoined Mrs. Toler.

“ I expect she will have a rare good try ! But now you know Mimi, I hope you will keep her out—as she kept *me* out,” and Mrs. Vanderhom laughed and displayed her fine white teeth, as she looked round for her gloves and boa—and then with one or two civil speeches

presently took leave—her taxi meanwhile had been ticking at the door for over an hour.

“What extravagance!” exclaimed Mrs. Toler, as she watched her guest drive away. “Money no object *now*, and as for what she came to tell us, I feel stunned——”

“I must have seen Jim Vanson, the day you and I spent at Chesham,” and being asked for an explanation, Jean related her experience.

Mrs. Vanderhom’s fears were amply justified. Mrs. Toler received a long, beautifully expressed letter from her eldest niece, relating how she had been most cruelly robbed by a friend—unnamed—and imploring hospitality, and financial assistance, from her dearest aunt.

Her dearest Aunt promptly sat down, and with a pink face, inscribed a stiff reply, which said :

“Mimi,—I enclose a cheque for £100, for your immediate assistance—it is the last time I will help you ; and this is my last letter to you. Your career of deception and lies, has been recently disclosed to me. I have read your correspondence with Mrs. Vanderhom. I am aware that you are a married woman, and that your visit to the Square was the result of a deliberately planned scheme. I also know that you stole and disposed of a quantity of your uncle’s china to Mr. Van Dele. I have seen it in his shop ; and he makes no secret of your share in the transaction. I need only add, that I am deeply concerned and humiliated to find myself aunt to an uncommon thief.

“H. E. Toler.”

The draft for one hundred pounds was made out to “Mrs. J. C. Vanson,” and as Mimi—having torn up the letter—folded the cheque, her colourless face was a terrible study in impotent fury.

CHAPTER XXXIV

PRIZES AND BLANKS

SIX hurrying months had fled since a frantic Mimi had torn her aunt's note to pieces, and scattered it over the carpet, and during this interval there had been two considerable events in Mrs. Toler's family—the marriage of Jean to Vernon Harlow, an unpretentious, happy ceremony, which took place in Tolerton Church, among Christmas holly and evergreens—the bride wearing furs—the outer world robed in white. This was presently followed by the brilliant nuptials of Lady Ann Tolerton—youngest and most popular of the two sisters—her husband, a rising star in the diplomatic firmament, had carried off his bride to the continent, from whence her letters describing her delightful surroundings, and social importance, were the pride and joy of her mother and friends.

It was a lovely fresh morning towards the end of May, and Lady Tolerton and her sole remaining daughter walked over to Parklands Cottage on purpose to welcome Aunt Henny, who had returned the previous evening from a prolonged stay at Harlow. Mrs. Toler was in the garden, visiting her roses, and whilst a maid went to summon her, the ladies waited in the drawing-room—a cool, pretty resting-place, flower-scented, and saturated with an atmosphere of comfort and tranquillity.

Lady Tolerton seated herself in an inviting arm-chair, but her daughter, with arrogant air, and critical vision, sauntered about, dipping into books and magazines, and examining bits of china.

"This is quite new," she exclaimed. "This lovely tortoiseshell box—yes—and the silver rose-bowl—presents from Jean, and already unpacked! And there is a family group—" studying it gravely. "Jean, and the old man—how grim he looks—and Vernon, nursing a dog," and she handed the photograph to her mother.

"Um, very nice indeed, your aunt will have heaps to tell us about Jean and her doings."

"Yes, of course, we shall hear wonderful tales, but you must make a good deal of allowance for Irish exaggeration!"

"My dear Marion!" protested her parent.

"Well, you know—Aunt Henny *does* embroider. She wrote that Colonel Harlow was absolutely devoted to Jean—I ask you—what can there be in common between that old man of the world, and a little insignificant chit like her?"

"*Vernon*," returned her mother impressively. "And besides, Jean is so good-tempered, and attractive, and pretty!"

"I never admired her," Lady Marion said sharply. "As a child, she was all legs and hair. I distrust that colour—red hair is always deceitful!"

Lady Tolerton gazed mournfully at her handsome, embittered daughter. Alas! the impression made by her beauty was so frequently effaced by her tongue. Poor Marion had her good qualities, but these were seriously discounted by an envious, dissatisfied nature—dating from her first nursery tea!

"I can't imagine how Jean ever came to make such a match," she continued peevishly, "or where she picked up young Harlow? Aunt Henny is always so vague, and talks of a week-end visit to people near Marklands, but I am sure Kitty Vaughan told me they were acquainted for years, and how,"—she paused, and surveyed her mother—"she lived among a set of cranks, and old fogies, never went to a dance, was never presented. I'm sure there's some mystery—something fishy."

"Hush, here's your aunt!" interrupted Lady Tolerton as a solid footfall was heard approaching, and Mrs. Toler entered, diffusing radiant smiles, and wearing an enormous pair of gardening gloves.

"So good of you to come so soon, you dears," embracing her sister-in-law, and niece. "I intended going over to you this afternoon, I've so much to tell you, I don't know where to begin!" seating herself and drawing down Lady Tolerton beside her on the couch.

"So you enjoyed yourself, these last two months?"

"Oh, yes—I spent such a happy time, among happy people!"

"Then the match is a success—so far?" asked her niece.

"A great success," replied her aunt with energy. "It is wonderful to see little Jean, the pivot of a large establishment. She has done marvels with the house—routed out fine old furniture from the attics—got rid of hideous monstrosities—heavy curtains, and musty draperies, and let in the sunlight. Then she has taken the gardens and grounds in hand, and has not an idle moment—nor Vernon either, he is an enthusiastic farmer, and goes in for all the new scientific methods—his energy is amazing!"

"And the old gentleman?"

"Not so very old, my dear—only sixty-five—he looks on, and applauds!"

"Then he must be changed indeed, or—is his mind weakening?"

"Not at all, you should see him playing chess. I sometimes think that a serious illness has an excellent effect on certain characters!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Marion. "What an idea!"

"For another thing, Jean is not in the least afraid of her father-in-law—not like his poor wife—and she has brought new pleasures into his life—her music, for instance, and her gaiety—she teases him—plays piquet with him, motors him about the country in a charming

two-seater—and it's 'Jean, Jean,—where is Jean?' all day long!"

"And Vernon Harlow——?"

"Devoted—as ever——" and then, with voluble enthusiasm, Aunt Henny went on to describe the daily life at Harlow, the pictures, the family heirlooms, the Harlow pearls. She sketched some of the household and tenants, and Jean's beautiful hunter, and the fat, white dog—her shadow—whose ridiculous name was "Uncle," and his appetite as that of the sea—to all of which Lady Tolerton listened with an unaffected, eager interest—her daughter with an expression of hard indifference; at last she said:

"Were you always a family party?"

"Oh, no; people came and went, Kitty Langland and her husband—Kitty Vaughan that was—very happy, reformed, and domesticated. A Colonel and Mrs. Alsager are expected this week—she was a widow, enormously rich. I met a Colonel and Mrs. Alsager some years ago—I dare say they are connections, it's not a common name!"

"Well, Aunt Henny, your account of Jean, and her doings sounds like a fairy tale. Do tell us about your other niece—the one who lived with Mr. Dargan?"

At this unexpected question, Mrs. Toler changed colour, and twisted her wedding ring nervously. She was recalling the disclosures of Mrs. Vanderhom. After a short silence, she drew herself up, and said in a sort of company voice:

"My eldest niece and I have nothing in common, and do not correspond."

"She had great influence with Mr. Dargan, had she not? He left her most of his fortune, and all the china—rather hard on you and Jean, Aunt Henny?"

Here Lady Tolerton, who was more or less behind the scenes, hastily interposed with a question respecting her sister's new cook.

Mrs. Toler gave the young woman a glowing character, and invited the visitors to remain to lunch, and test her capacity. This they declined, as they were expecting

guests, and presently rose to leave. Mrs. Toler accompanied them—as was her custom—to the entrance, once more discoursing of Harlow, its glories, its gardens, and its occupants—their hopes and their plans. After an exchange of last words and farewells, the ladies from the Court departed, but Aunt Henny still lingered at the white gate, looking after the couple gradually passing out of sight, between hawthorn-powdered hedges. There went Adelaide! best of sisters; self-denying, generous and dignified—her daughter, self-satisfied, erect, and elegant—what a thousand pities that for all her grace, she had such a mean and contemptible streak in her character. Marion had introduced the subject of Mimi on purpose to discount and interrupt her raptures about Harlow. Mimi's very name brought a heavy cloud into a serene blue sky: the last she had heard of her treacherous kinswoman, was a report that she had pursued the faithless Jim to Rio. Nevertheless, she was instinctively aware that Mimi had extraordinary powers of recuperation—her disappearance from England would not be permanent—but, please God, she would never again rise upon *her* horizon! and with this half-breathed prayer, Mrs. Toler returned to her garden.

THE END

